

On·Spec

SUMMER 2001

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NEW FICTION

Gary ARCHAMBAULT

E.L. CHEN

Lena DeTAR

Matthew JOHNSON

Jarret KEENE

Catherine MacLEOD

Vera NAZARIAN

David J. SCHWARTZ

Douglas SMITH

Allen WEISS

Elizabeth WESTBROOK

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THEME ISSUE: WORLD BEAT

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ConSpec 2001

a symposium on SF in Canada

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Cedar Park Inn, Edmonton, Alberta

with our Guests of Honor

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and
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Michael Bishop and Allen Steele

September 15-16
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ON·SPEC

Summer 2001
Theme: World Beat

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On this issue...

World Beat

Diane L. Walton, General Editor

ACROSS THE LAND DURING THE SUMMER, WE SEE many colorful festivals celebrating the amazing cultural mosaic that is Canada. It is only fitting that our summer issue should also portray the World Beat in speculative writing.

We asked writers to look into their own cultural heritage or sample another. We asked for "writing from the roots" as well as from the heart and mind. We asked for a celebration of cultures, and what a celebration we have for you! Here's a sampler. Some of our writers chose to set their work in the framework of an existing folk tale, spinning it off in a different way. ELIZABETH WESTBROOK reaches to the east coast for "Sedna's Daughter," set in a Newfoundland fishing community. VERA NAZARIAN gives us a different take on a traditional European legend in "Swans." Other writers wanted to see what they could do with borrowed characters or elements from myth and legend. Culture as a setting was a popular theme among our writers: in "The Comfort of Thunder," DAVID J. SCHWARTZ looks at life and death from two very different points of view; in "The Trickster's Lot," LENA DETAR draws heavily on a mix of mythology from present-day Hopi, Zuni, and Navaho beliefs; and JARRET KEENE weaves history and magic in "Conjure Me," set in New Orleans. In some, a real culture is used as inspiration for the story: a loving exploration of the bridge between generations in MATTHEW JOHNSON's delightful "Closing Time"; a wandering Jewish wizard in "The Missing Word" by ALLAN WEISS; and honor and an impossible choice in DOUGLAS SMITH's "The Red Bird." Past and present clash in E.L. CHEN's "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" when a Canadian journalist goes to Tiananmen Square in June of 1989, and in GARY ARCHAMBAULT's "The Blue, Blue Grass of Home," the culture acts as a bridge between the everyday and the fantastic.

Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize

We are thrilled to announce that HOLLY PHILLIPS is the winner of the Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize for her story "No Such Thing As An Ex-Con" (Spring 2000). We award the prize each year for the best story published in *On Spec* by a new writer under thirty. Holly's work continues to amaze us with her originality and deep insights, and you will see more of her writing in upcoming issues.

ConSpec

ConSpec is coming up fast, and spaces in the 2-day writers workshop with MICHAEL BISHOP and ALLEN STEELE are limited. Don't forget—your conference registration is included in the workshop fee. See the ConSpec ad on the inside front cover, or check out the web site (www.compumart.ab.ca/clear/conspec.htm) for more details. ♣

Swans

Vera Nazarian

I CONTINUE TO KNIT EVEN NOW, AS THEY STIR UP
the flames below me.

They hadn't bothered to tie my hands, out of pity maybe. Or maybe, this freedom is his final love gift to me.

My fingers move rapidly, a storm. They work the needles, pulling rough strands of colorless wool into loops and stitches, starting the last sleeve of the seventh shirt. Meanwhile, my mind wanders, lulled into a moment of peace, of times blurring.

I blink. And I wake from a recurring daydream of a deep velvet black sky, with sprinkles of sugar that are pinpoints of light, pale saffron and green.

The wonder of it stands to engulf me. In spirit I sail the boat of gossamer that is my body—their bodies, all. I inhabit them. This is the flesh of a swan, covered in pearl-white down, but turned to huelessness by the night. Above, below me, beating wings, none of them my own. On one level I feel nothing, hear a vacuum of silence, while on another level I hear the crackling of the rising flames.

I stand, tied at the waist with loose bonds that connect me to the stake and yet allow me to move my hands and work violently. My fingers express what I myself cannot speak; they tear at the wool, and weep and rage as they pull upon the string and form the loops. The fingers wail in silent agony of twisting contorting fury at the helplessness.

I am mute.

If I speak a word, if I laugh, or make a sound, it will all be for nothing. All of these damned seven years, for nothing...

That had been the hardest, keeping the silence. My vocal cords have atrophied, and I swallow, feeling the flaccidity at the back of my throat. I swallow the air of twilight, the smoke rising from the crackling fire below, and the hollow silence.

Keeping silence became difficult only on the fifth year. That was when he found me. Before that I had lived alone, surrounded by the seething forest. My little hut had nothing in it but piles of wool, and everywhere, swan feathers. The wool was spun together with my hair, a perfect uninterrupted strand. Endlessly I had to start over, every time my hair woven into the string broke. For that continuity was a part of the bargain.

Or was it? I no longer remember if my own hair had been part of that promise I made, a requirement for the bonds of enchantment to fall. But I was obsessively compulsive...

On that fifth year, it had been hard not to make a sound when he took me with him out of the forest—while I trembled in terror and held on to the bundle of completed and unfinished shirts, which he allowed me to take with us—and brought me out into the alien city where he was lord. There, among strangers, he placed me in a building of marble and glass and filigree, and had me dressed in heavy brocade, velvet and silk.

I became his mute queen.

And then, one night, silence became hardest when he came to me and held me to his body with a sweetness that melted my limbs, and gently stroked me, enveloping me with warm lassitude. At some point, while the night breeze poured garden fragrance upon us from the balcony, his gentle touch became one of strength. The world narrowed in around us. Strength was pressing down, stifling me with pleasure, molding me into pliant shapelessness; force was in the fabric of the world, pouring into my flesh. And then he moved within me, delving into places I never knew I had. As he moved, the rhythm eventually did something to me, which nearly caused me to cry out. Only, I did not; I bit his shoulder instead, like a little snarling bitch. He would laugh later, calling me his wild little one, his beloved she-beast from the forest.

He still has that wound on his shoulder, from my teeth. It is a wound-mark of my love and silence. He will have it tomorrow when I am no longer there. A mark to remember me by.

My fingers flying, I knit the last shirt, and wait for my brothers, listen for the distant sound of beating wings. They will come, I dare to know, in this twilight, and the rising crackle of flames of the pyre below me...

They will come.

Their coming will rescue not only them, but it will rescue me from myself, from my mad promise of silence. For today, as the flames burn, night falls upon a day that is nearly the last day of the seventh year of my muteness. In truth, I don't know what day it is, whether it is a week short of my vow or not. Really, it doesn't matter, for even if such were the case, I would be dead tonight, and all would be over anyway. This is my last chance.

The moment is now.

Silence had been hard, nearly impossible, when I had given birth to the child. It is a child that had been taken away from me in secret injustice, which is the cause of my standing here on the burning pyre. Then, I had cried in wordless agony in my mind, birthing it, birthing the fruit of our sweet rhythmic movement in the dark—he and I moving, sweet power

flowing all around, and he riding me deep...

They say that pain and pleasure are two opposites of one singular thing, and you must have one to justify having the other. The pain of birthing had caused me to clench my hands against the white linens until my knuckles felt no blood flowing, and I had no sense left in my arms. They had given me a bit of wood to bite on—as they give all women in that moment of personal hell—and I was glad for it, just as I had been glad for his shoulder in that melting warm pleasure-dark.

I birthed and I gnawed the wood to the quick.

And I didn't cry out.

Later, they let me see the child, touch her, put her to my pale white flesh. A contrast of flushed newborn pink and rose against adult pallor.

She suckled me, took my breast between tiny lips, and I trembled with a feeling of tenderness and fear, a dichotomy of intensity that caused tears to well in my eyes, while my vision doubled from the effort to contain myself, and to keep the silence...

And then, while I lay in the post-delivery stupor, someone came and took her away from me, took my daughter, that tender little being, away from me. She only had time to drain the right one of my breasts, while the other remained heavy with milk and aching against my heart.

I didn't even have the chance to learn her sweet newborn smell.

And when they took her, I did not cry out. I only allowed my mind to scream in white agony, for I was too ill and weak from giving birth and from holding on to the silence all throughout. I was too ill to rise and go after them, to stop them and to bring the child back.

I took the piece of wood, what was left of it, and I weakly struck it against the walls, against a metal basin at my side, against the posts of the bed—weakly, yet with all my strength.

I was still striking the wall the next hour when they found me. The sound I was making had been so faint that no one could have heard me from outside my room.

For, even then, I did not cry out.

It was then that he came to my side. He questioned me, shook me by the shoulders, then moved away and cried in rage at those who stood around him, accusing them justly of neglect of me and the child. Eventually he quieted, and came forward on his knees and placed his dark raven head against my naked breast. For once, I felt his trembling silence to match my own.

The room emptied, leaving us, and long he remained on his knees, his face buried in my soft breast, until finally, in the tumult of the gathering dark, our intermingled madness and grief, I let him take my breast, lying full and aching, and suckled him like a babe...

And I never spoke a word.

And now, I blink once more, this time because the smoke has gotten strong around me, and the fire burns closer with each breath. I huddle the finished six shirts stuffed tight inside my heavy upper clothing, away from the raining sparks, while like a madwoman, I knit, and the sleeve is nearing completion.

I cough, even then in silence, choking on the burning air of approaching death.

And then, in the deepening twilight, I can almost hear it, the beating of wings.

My eyelids close, and I find once more the solace of a dream where I am flying in a soft body of down, stretching my slender neck forward against the onrushing wind. The air is clean and cold, and I can breathe freely as I open my beak and scream out, while my brothers join me, and everywhere is the pounding of wings...

After the child was gone, he would not come to me for months, leaving me to nocturnal solitude. I could not write, never having learned the art, and thus could not explain, nor even express my sympathy, my equal sorrow to him, who was my king, my lord and lover.

And eventually, when the days of autumn narrowed into dim light and the trees had lost their fiery leaves into a brown ichor that littered the cooling earth, the sixth year of my silence was nearly at a close. It was on one of such deep long evenings that he finally broke his coldness, and he came to me by the warm blazing hearth. There, I lowered myself down on my knees before him, and I buried my head against his feet, and washed them with my mute tears. The shape my body took before him was calling out for his forgiveness.

And he read the unspoken language of my form correctly. He took me, enveloping me in the warm strength of his arms, and because his need for me was so strong, he allowed himself to forget all past, to let the veil of pain between us slip away.

Once again we were lovers throughout the dark autumn and then winter nights, lying in a sweet cocoon of intimacy while the winds raged outside, and patterned frost obscured the window glass.

When spring came, I too had quickened once again, and the child grew within me like a beloved fruit of tenderness. It was once again nearly impossible to keep the silence, because I wanted to laugh, to cry out with joy, when I felt it kicking the insides of my womb.

I sat in a rocking chair, warmed by gentle sun through a faint curtain of gauze, knitting the sixth and then starting the seventh shirt, while my child danced within me, and the day of its birth drew near.

I remember that day even now, as smoke stifles me, and my fingers barely continue moving in their automatic deathly rhythm, no longer filled with sensation but rather agony, as they fold the needles and pull the loops of string.

When the child was born, he had made sure that we were well watched, and this time spent all days in our company. My infant this time was a boy child, lusty and pink with health, and I grinned with pleasure feeling him at my breast, feeling the smoothness of his tiny cheek against my flesh.

For days, we were living an idyll. And then, one night, someone came—and this time I knew her, the old woman that was his own stern mother—and took the child away, while I found myself heavy with drugs that must've been poured into my cup half an hour earlier. I fainted, as I ran after them, so that I was found on the floor when someone had come to

check up on us.

This time, he came to me with insane eyes. He struck me several times, and I wept, but did not cringe, for in my self-hate I had wanted him to strike me, wanted to feel the pain for what I knew I had deserved, for not having prevented this terror the second time. For this time I had no excuse. And I had not cried out.

His judgment this time could not be prevented. I was locked into a tiny room, bare of luxury, with a single poor cot. There he visited me for a week. He raved, he begged me to speak on his knees. He would throw me on the floor and strike me with his feet, and then would come down on his knees and beg me to strike him in return. He begged forgiveness, which I gave him with all my heart, as I remained mute and tenderly stroked his hair.

And then he would rave again, and at one point, he forced me back on the cot, and in a bizarre fury was overcome with lust—a death lust—and he rode me. When he was spent, he fell upon me weeping, cradling my body against his in a pitiful embrace that I knew would be our last.

For the next day, I was to be burned as a dark witch, a changeling, a mute sorceress that would never speak the words to clear herself. Such was the law, and not even the lord or his beloved could rise above it.

And even then, I did not say a word, did not cry out. Only one thing was left for me. I continued knitting, because that one inexplicable obsession he would never deny me, not even now.

I knit now, with my eyes closed, while smoke rises above my head. The thread no longer has a single hair from my head running through it, but that can no longer be helped, for there is no time, and I must continue the best I can.

The sleeve is almost finished.

The beating of wings...

Am I hallucinating this, or is it indeed so? Could it be that suddenly, the air is clean of smoke around me?

I open my eyes, and see shadows of deep pallor, illuminated into golden whiteness by the nearby flames. They fall down from the sky upon me, while all around, cries of the multitude are heard.

And from a great distance, far in the crowd, I see his sorrowing eyes. He watches me. Even now.

He loves me, I know he loves and wants me, and I cannot even defend myself in his eyes, cannot tell him I am not guilty, cannot even tell him what truth I know.

That, I think, while I hallucinate the beating of wings around me. My dream brothers had come to save me, and to save themselves.

The last stitches come rough. Indeed, I am not quite done, but something truly does fan at my head and I smell less smoke than I should...

What could it be?

Something is beating at me violently, as I blink, thrown into a dream—or is it the here and now?

I have no brothers. Never did.

They were but the singular yearnings of my lonely mind, a soft dream of white feathers and family.

And yet, why is there a commotion in the crowd?

And why does he suddenly come running forward, with an insane cry of hope issuing from his beloved lips?

The shapes of light come hurtling at me from above, their beating wings keeping away the flames. And with a mad instinct, I scramble and remove the shirts that lie hidden at my breast, unwrapping the first, flapping out the coarseness, and letting it land over the flying shape of whiteness nearest me.

I blink, and the twilight air shimmers, and I see a miracle taking place. The form grows, elongates, and takes on the shape of a man.

Without thinking, I move and unwrap the second shirt, and toss it even as it is unfolding upon another flying being, and it also transforms...

I continue thus, four more times, until six male shapes stand around me, putting out the flames among the clamoring yells of the crowd, and all I have is but one shirt left, the one with an unfinished sleeve. It, I toss finally at a single smaller younger bird shape that flutters, wings beating violently in my face.

The swan also dissolves before me, another man, this one a youth, this one with an incomplete leftover wing where his right arm should be. It is just about where my hair had run out and I had continued knitting without it...

The seven brothers that I never had stand around me, while looking above I see the rest of a great white flock, like a pale gossamer cloud obscuring the blackness of the sky.

My lord, my beloved, rushes to me, but the seven stand tight, protecting me with the whiteness of their arms like wings, and in that moment I know that I can speak at last, I can break the silence.

And thus, I open my lips, and take in a deep breath, and then I cry out.

And the scream that issues out of me is not quite human, but wild, hoarse, terrifying, filled with seven years of pent-up truth and agony, seven long years of frustrated terrible pleasure, pain, sorrow, wonder, love, and madness.

It is not human, that cry, for my vocal cords had lost their ability for speech a long time ago.

It is the scream of a swan. ❁

In upcoming issues...

In upcoming issues of *On Spec*, you'll find new work by CORY DOCTOROW, JAMES VAN PELT, DAVID LIVINGSTONE CLINK, ELIZABETH MATSON, VIVIAN ZENARI, JANINE CROSS, ROBERT H. BEER, CATHERINE MACLEOD, E.L. CHEN, STEVE MOHN, HOLLY PHILLIPS, NATALKA ROSHAK, KAREN TRAVISS, DAVE KIRTLEY, IAN CREASEY, SUSAN MAYSE, LENA DETAR, HARRY JAMES CONNOLLY, CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY, JULIA HELEN WATTS, PAUL E. MARTENS, and many more!

Sedna's Daughter

Elizabeth Westbrook

IF YOU WANTS STORIES, SIR, THERE'S A WONDERFUL sight of them about the sea. Take names. Folks know the sea by a lot of names. In olden times and other places, they'd call her Mother. Them old Greeks other side of the world, they even pretended she's a fella called Poseidon. Old Mother Rachel told me the Inuit up along to the north calls her Sedna.

Where Rachel got that from, I can't say for sure, but her man was a right wanderer before he settled down. He might have picked it up on his ice-breaker days.

Rachel's man left one day to go fishing and never come back, not even dead. Mother Sea took him. But that's another story. As I say, there's a wonderful sight of stories, and, around here, most of them touch on the sea, on Sedna, as I likes to call her since Rachel told me that name.

Sedna was a fisherman's daughter her ownself, Inuit you see, way before any white folks turned up there. Didn't matter no how if she was a girl or a boy with them old Inuit, if her father wanted help with his fishing, then along she had to go to help him. But she wouldn't mind her father's orders and work on the lines. She'd dangle her long hair over the side of the boat and I do imagine she liked to watch it float, after the way of girls when they're young with queer notions.

But one day she falls in the water.

Now, someone like you, sir, from away, might not know that anyone in these waters has a second or two to get out before they're finished. Here or up to the Arctic, it's all the same. It's the dreadful cold, you see, sir.

Right quick, Sedna grabs the side of her father's little boat, trying to haul

herself back in. I can imagine her gasping and bawling to the man to help her, can't you? But, you know what he does? Her father, her own father, hauls out his great stone gutting blade and cuts off all her fingers. The way he told it, she'd have capsized them so there'd be no man nor no boat to feed all the rest of the hungry family back on the land. There's probably more to it than that, the shocking old devil. What he really meant is another story, likely, too dark to tell.

Since then, sir, Sedna had no love for men of the sea.

Since then? Oh yes. The magic of her father's crime was so great that Sedna didn't drown. In those days such a thing was special, and carried a wonderful sight of magic. Not like now. That's how Rachel tells it, and who's to say she's wrong? Even Christian folk here at the Cove can recognize 'tis a way of seeing things that matches up with the way things are. A closer match, be sure, than the notion of a merciful God. Best wipe that off your little tape recorder, my dear. Island folk might find such talk right queer.

Anyhow, young Sedna sank to the bottom of the sea, and some says that the fishes and seals was born out of her cut-off fingers, though I say, if that was so, what was her father fishing for before he cut them off? Rachel says her long, long hair scooped up the fishes and seals as she sank under the waves like nets reeling out from a great old trawler. Whatever the truth of the matter, there Sedna squatted on the bottom of the sea, right beautiful and terrible in her anger, her long dark hair in a tangle from her drowning and her rage at her father. And full of fish and all.

Rachel always told it long, but to make it short, a magic man of their people goes on some sort of dream trip down under the ocean after finding out where the fish and seals have gone. See, with them all tangled in Sedna's hair those people were hungry, for they couldn't catch no fish nor nothing. Like around here, these days. Maybe we needs a magic man to go talk to the mean old wet mother, much good would it do.

Anyhow, this fella he finds Sedna down there. She catches him up on the details and he sweet talks her till she settles some. Then he combs them fish and all out of her hair so folks can eat. After that, when fish are few, folks up there say Sedna's mad again. Around here we says it's from over-fishing. Either way, the sea has rules, and when someone breaks them, things go wrong.

Which brings me to my story.

Lor Jee, no, Rachel's story that I just told is what makes sense of this one I'm after telling you now. But maybe you don't want it in your book. No doubt an educated fella like yourself knows better than us sea folk what's a proper yarn and how to tell it.

Well now, well now. There's no need for a carry on. I meant no offense neither, my dear. Here, put a drop of rum in that tea and I'll start. But first I'll say this.

Rachel's story makes it sound like Sedna is all-powerful. True enough, she's dreadful strong and fearsome. But it's a kind of woman's power. Not the power to go and do, but the power to take and to hold back. You see,

sir, Sedna or the sea or whatall you care to call it, she's confined to her place. Even when she's maddest, she can only leap up and dash herself at the land. She can't take anyone who hasn't come to her in the first place. She can nag, and make life a misery, if she wants, but it's possible for the ones she's mad at to stay beyond her reach. The people here, they live with the sea, beside her and on her, and take their livelihood from her. Still, they can get away up to the land, and she can't.

She'd like to, oh Sedna would, and so she builds up a head of jealousy and frustration. When that happens, she waits for some fisherman to break the rules, to go out on the sea when she's in a mood. Then she hauls him down with a hank of that hair, and squeezes him in her arms, as if she could suck the power of land and air out of him and into herself. Whatever made her so, that's Sedna's nature. Keep that in your mind as I tell this.

Sedna had a daughter. How she got her no one knows but Sedna, and like many an unwed mother she's tight-lipped on the subject. Some might say this daughter was a beautiful thing, with hair as long and dark as her mother's, but not all tangled up full of crabs and cod. Smooth and dark as a seal's wet pelt, was this girl's hair. Nadooine was her name.

As Nadooine grew, she fell to arguing with her mother. Even the children of magic folk and gods gets troublesome as they struggle out of childhood. My own son kept me awake with worry many a night at that betwixt and between age. I have it on good authority my husband did the same to his own dear mother, and her raising him all by herself since his father was sucked down into the sea, the poor dear man.

Nadooine was a soft-hearted creature. She thought it was wonderful cruel, all this harsh exchange of life blood for life blood. Why do the men need to slaughter so many creatures of the sea? And why must Mother insist on taking so many men to her cold wet bed? Why can't there be some middle ground between them? That was the sort of thing she was after asking Sedna. Sedna was after telling her that men was shocking greedy devils and had it coming to them. End of discussion.

Not for Nadooine, it wasn't. She argued and argued until her mother lost all patience, not that rare a thing for Sedna, I can tell you. As can anyone from the Bering Strait to the Atlantic coast.

"Enough, child," she hissed at Nadooine. "Go and find out about it for yourself." The little crabs she let crawl around on her face scuttled away from her gnashing teeth. Her hair swirled and snapped in the water and she turned the slim sea girl into a seal pup, half grown, and thin and hungry and with no power of speech, unless you call the dark liquid look in her eyes a kind of talking.

Nadooine flitted away from there right quick, be sure. She wandered. She gulped air that burned her lungs with the cold on it. She felt an urge she'd never felt before, to catch and eat the quick silvery fish. But she weren't fast enough, nor skilled enough, neither. And she swam, and she swam, and got thinner and thinner, till she was nothing more than a poor noghead.

A noghead, sir? That's what folks here calls a young seal as has lost

its mother. Its head grows, but its body is all long and skinny, instead of plump and round like a seal should be. Screecher, they calls them, too, because they're always calling, calling out for their lost mothers. Puts a right chill in my soul, that noise does.

Anyway, at last Nadooine was so tired and hungry, she stopped her swimming. The water felt cold to her, because she lacked the seal fat, as cold as her cruel mother's heart. She hauled herself up on a shelf of ice and wept, but it came out as a shocking caterwauling.

After a while, a man rode out of the dark, bouncing over the ice pack on a noisy little land boat, as she saw it. A skidoo is what it was, sir. He come right to the edge where she was at. He stopped and stared at her, his shoulders looking wide and black up against the stars. She stared back. Then he lunged at her, and she only just slithered out of his hot hands into the sea. She stayed under the surface till she had to come up for breath, something that never worried her when she was living down below with her mother.

When she come up in a crack, there he was again with them big grasping hands and pale eyes as strange to her as the surface of the sea, which she'd hardly ever known except from underneath. Again she escaped.

To cut a long one shorter, this went on for days. He come after her with nets and tricks. She'd slip away with her life, but with no strength to swim far.

Back up in his house on the point, there was an old widow who feared the fisherman had gone queer in the head for sure. She was mighty concerned because this boy was her own son, that she'd raised herself since ten years past when her husband went to Sedna's nasty arms. So she asked him and herself, "Lor Jee, what are you wanting to go after this one screecher for, when there's nets to mend, and fish to be got?"

He said, "Is that so unusual for a fisherman, Mother?" Which shut her up because the island people were half sick of all the noise about the fishers' blood lust. To this day, people up along the mainland and over to Europe, they say the fishers love to kill animals. You hear those people talk on the radio, and you see those pictures in the shiny magazines, of the men clubbing away on the seals. Next there's a close one of a white pup with great dark eyes and the rheum running from them like tears. And there's a blonde movie-star, no better than she ought to be, crying over the poor thing, and her with paint on her face that's after killing a dory full of research rabbits so as it won't have anything in it to gall her fine skin.

So the widow wouldn't say nothing more, knowing he'd had to kill seals that got tangled up in his nets, the nets tore up something shocking and the seal bleeding and near to drowned anyway. Those nets cost four hundred dollars and brought in little money enough. But that didn't mean he liked it. And it was a clean bullet to the skull he'd give, no clubbing. And she knew that. And maybe he was after making up for it somehow in his soft heart.

So, anyway, for days his mother watched this obsession to catch the little screecher. But the seal pup got weaker and weaker, and at last, he got her.

He brought her to the dock in his arms, and placed her away in a dip down in the ice.

Nadooine believed he was going to take her blood. Sedna, her unloving mother, had offered her up to the man. And indeed, he appeared to prepare her for some sort of sacrifice, because he grabbed her roughly, held her tight under his arm and, despite her struggles, smeared her face and mouth with raw herring. He splashed her all over with white stuff from a container of the sort she'd only ever seen before rusting empty on the floor of the sea. She fought him with the last of her strength.

When she saw the old woman come on down to the water's edge, Nadooine was even more afraid. She knew women are the power ones, and rarely came into Sedna's grasp. This old one held a shining white bowl and came at her right determined. And as Nadooine bawled out to her mother in her deathly despair, the old woman threw something from the white bowl at her. It near choked her as it flew down her throat, and it was warm, and sweet, and good, good, good.

And the old widow woman laughed and her son did too, and he cried, "Oh Mother, oh Mother, she'll have more of that." Then he took the white bowl and laid it down on the ground with a bit of the dead herring flesh around and he walked off a little way with the old widow.

Nadooine thought, "Not a sacrifice, then, but an offering."

That widow was none other than Rachel, and that was her son John. And that seal pup, as they thought her, learned to drink from the bowl, and eat the herring. Soon she was sliding up to John as soon as she heard him call. Other folks would come just to see her eat and John would tell them she was better than any dog. He'd swear her dark seal eyes told him more of gladness and devotion than any words.

Living inside of that half-grown seal, Nadooine came to believe that men aren't like her mother said, wanting blood all the time. Wrong, Mother's wrong, she sang to him with her funny bark, and smiled up at him, and he rubbed her pelt, and tied a bright red ribbon round her throat as a sign that she was sacred to him. And she came to him, again and again, as she grew strong and full of womanly magic.

At last, she could bear no more to gaze at him, and feel his big hands rumple her fur, and yet be unable to speak her love for him beyond her hoarse barking cry. She went out on the solid water, the ice, and called to her mother to help her somehow.

John called her back, his voice full of worry and fear. He knew that harm waited for her in the sea, that there were fishermen with guns and gaffes, and hooks and nets. And who knew what else was out there. She felt so sorry for him, she had to go back to reassure him she was fine. He'd pat her head, and smile fondly at her while she could do nothing but near burst with longing.

And so she'd leave again, and each time, she swam further, and stayed away longer.

Now, back on the land, the widow Rachel was arguing at her son to accept the fact that the seal must do what wild things do and take its

chances in the sea. She told John he was breaking some sort of sea rules to be so right determined about it. She said "sea rules," but she meant "Sedna's rules," be sure.

As for Nadooine, she finally knew her mother would never come help her, no matter how she called. She had to go to her mother. So she swam deep, deep, beyond the reach of John's voice. She came up again and again for air, because she was in the form of a creature that's a child of all the cool elements, the water, the air, and the land. She needed them all. And beside that, she loved to breathe the air she knew John was after breathing so far away.

She went a long way north until she could feel the chill presence she knew so well. She circled round and round, knowing her mother was below her deep in the dreadful dark. But still her mother would not come up no matter how far her daughter had swum to see her. So Nadooine dove as deep as her lungs allowed but she could not get close to her mother at all.

Then she knew what she had to do. She had to let it all go if she was to get what she wanted. She had to let go the air and the land and embrace the sea, only the sea, if Sedna was to pay her any notice. She stroked down, down, and when her lungs burned for air, she released the last silver bubbles. And she continued. With the cold sea chill in her dying lungs, she sought the one Rachel called Sedna, though Nadooine knew her then only as Mother. Her seal's body slipped away from her and drifted empty to the surface leaving only the red ribbon round her own neck.

Back on the land, John sensed a great loss, and put his face to the wind so folks would think that was the cause of his tears.

When Nadooine finally arrived at her mother's lair, the creature said not so much as "How do you fare?" She stroked the pale cheek of her latest drowned fisherman and nodded and smiled as if she knew all along that Nadooine would be coming back to her.

"So, how did you die?" she asked her daughter. "Drowned in one of their nets, was it? Ripped by harpoons or bullets? Or did one of them strangle you with that ridiculous rag on your neck?"

Nadooine thought to say, I died of your harsh indifference, but she did not waste the time on the old game of tit for tat. "Send me back as a human girl, Mother," she says. "I want to marry a fisherman."

Watching her mother's hair rise up like a thing alive and whip the surrounding water to a froth, Nadooine wondered if she should have found a more sideways approach to the subject. She'd become too used to the simple way of the man she loved.

Her mother flung away the body of the drowned fisherman. Somewhere on the coast, some weeping woman would soon find his remains and bury them beside the others Sedna had sent back when she was done with them.

No concern to Sedna that. The great woman snatched at Nadooine's long hair, likely after shaking sense into her. But it slid away out of her fingerless hands. She had to be satisfied with bitter words. "Men are killers

and rapists," she cried.

"Some have been so cruel, I know that," Nadooine replied. Her beloved fisherman had warned her of some men's cruelty, hadn't he? And protected her from it.

"All of them are thus," Sedna replied. "They ravish and murder even their own children." Of course, she meant Nadooine's grandfather, but the girl didn't know the story at that time. It might have been better if she had. In any case, Nadooine replied to her.

"Not all. Some take just what they need, and they give their children to the sea," she said. "To you."

"I take them, you mean," her mother snarled, raising her arms and shaking her impotent fists. "Blood for blood. Breath for breath."

"It's an exchange they're making," Nadooine returned, quick as that. "A dedication. Life for livelihood."

"Fool, again," said her mother. But her hair floated in less lively fashion and she sank, squatting and staring at her daughter in a manner right considering. Nadooine thought how it was likely no one had ever spoken so to her mother and survived. But now she saw the chance to show her mother a different way of seeing. A chance to win her one hope in all existence.

"You thought to send me out to die by men's hands, hard mother," she dared to say. "But it was a fisherman saved me." Her mother tightened in on herself and listened.

"He fed me warm white liquor sweet and rich as milk from a mother seal. He caught me fish, and cut them into little pieces I could eat until I was strong enough to rip them up myself. He showed me this way that there is an agreement between you and them. A balance between the giving and the taking."

"Fear," said her mother.

"Respect," insisted Nadooine.

Sedna and Nadooine sat long then, gazing at each other, each of them deep in her thoughts. The mother's hair drew in tight to her, wrapping her body in a dark cocoon. Nadooine's lifted on the currents, as if tasting the waters that had circled so far and so free in the world's oceans.

On the surface, the fisher folk marveled at the calmness of the sea, and rejoiced at the best harvests they'd had in years, praying that perhaps this was a turn around after the years of poor stocks. All were glad but two. One was the fisherman, John, searching heartbroken for the body of a young seal with a red ribbon round her neck. The other was Rachel, one eye on her son and the other on the sky, worrying and knowing that this quiet was too good to be true. This is how loving mothers feel, anxious for their children all the time. So I discovered when I had my own son, sir. It doesn't matter what age they are.

At long last, Sedna said, "Aye, and maybe I will send you back to him."

Nadooine felt a burst of joy. "I'd visit you, Mother, I'd come see you whenever you pleased," she cried. "Wait'll you see him. You'll love him as much as I do."

A tiny crab wandered into her mother's mouth. She crushed it between

her teeth and spat the pieces into the current. And Nadooine fell silent with a shudder in her heart at the smile on her mother's face. It was a smile that gave with one stunted hand because it enjoyed so much taking back with the other.

"Mother," Nadooine pleaded, one last time. Her mother smiled wider and sank even lower under the weight of her malice. Nadooine saw that and understood it with a shock, understood what kept her mother so deep in the cold dark, forever grabbing at the morsels of life that drifted over the surface of her waters.

She lifted her chin and said, "Aye, Mother, and maybe you cannot stop my going."

And Sedna rose up, her cry piercing the seas.

"I'll not give you human form!"

Nadooine smiled a smile worthy of her own mother.

"It's humanity I want, and that's not yours to give, is it, Mother?" She turned away and drifted up toward the day above the water, buoyed by her love for her man John.

Behind her, Sedna boomed like a mythic monster of old times. "Humanity is mine to *take!*"

THERE WAS A DANCE THE NIGHT OF THE BIG BLOW. BY ALL ACCOUNTS, IT WAS a jolly, jolly dance. The boats were all in and tied up, and everyone celebrated the first decent season in years. Even John and his mother planned to go. Or, at least, Rachel told her son she had a mind to go and he'd better take her or she'd look a right scandal. Foolishness of course, but a way to get him into a place where there were a few eligible local girls. She admitted as much, later on. When time came, and he was scrubbed and proper dressed in a clean shirt, she sent him off ahead, so she could cut up a few sandwiches to take along.

When she arrived at the dance, it was all laughing, and stamping, and music so loud it shut out the howl and growl of the weather beating at the snug walls of the hall. However, Rachel discovered John wasn't there, nor had ever got there according to everyone she asked. She stayed on a bit, talking with this one and that, but she couldn't stop thinking of the picture in her mind of her son wandering up and down the shore, calling to that seal, and the awful sea reaching up for him, taking him down to join with his father.

She went out in the storm. Wrapped in a borrowed duffel coat, she struggled up and down the shore. She'd never seen the water reach so high in the bay. Dark swathes of it slapped out, reaching and grabbing at what it could get. Rachel went down on the shingle, too close to that angry ocean. She screamed back at it, daring the wet bitch to try her worst with her, and then begging the sweet goddess to take her instead, and give her back her son alive. The plea just seemed to whip Sedna to new fury. Lunging, she curled a cold arm of salt sea around Rachel's ankles. But the sea neither took the widow, nor offered up the son. In the end, Sedna spat Rachel back onto the shore. Then she reached out and shoved the old

woman away from her with one dreadful, frustrated wave.

Wet, weary and cold, the widow headed home. She said later she couldn't face going back to the dance and all those sweating, laughing faces looking at her queer when they saw her right soaked like that.

What she found at her house didn't give her great peace of mind either.

There was her son in the kitchen, shirtless, with his elbows on the table, and a mug of warm milk hidden in his big hands. His hair was drying stiff with salt, his good trousers was all soaked through, and his good shoes was gone altogether. Yet he was laughing, laughing at nothing at all except the sight across the table from him. That was a girl, her damp dark hair tangled over her shoulders and down her back. She looked like she wanted to get warm, huddled round her own mug of milk, but her eyes, dark and shining, laughed back to him in happy answer. And outside the snug little house, the storm screamed and shouted that she wasn't done yet, sure. It was a picture Rachel never wearied of telling, along with what came next.

At the sound of the door slamming, John leapt up. Nadooine stared in terror at the poor wet old woman as if she was the sea hag herself come for them.

"This is Nadooine," he says. "She's come back here to live."

"Wit' us?" says Rachel. He gives her a long slow look, and Nadooine feels a great question being argued between them, at least as momentous as the one she'd just had with her own mother. Knowing now the power of a woman full of love, she feared.

Then Rachel looks over at the girl dressed in a mix-up of old clothes she had to recognize as her own plus a sweater of her son's she'd knitted her ownself. I shouldn't wonder she'd have recognized the ribbon round the girl's neck too, though she never talked of it. The closest she ever came to it later on was to say as how she thought the people around Suffering Cove are married to the sea anyways, only to be parted by death or the dole. This wouldn't be so very different. But there are things properly left unsaid.

"Nadine," she says. "That sounds like an Acadian name."

The girl opened her mouth to tell her the right way of saying it, but the son cast her a quick glance.

"That's what we'll say," he said. "That's she's Acadian French from away."

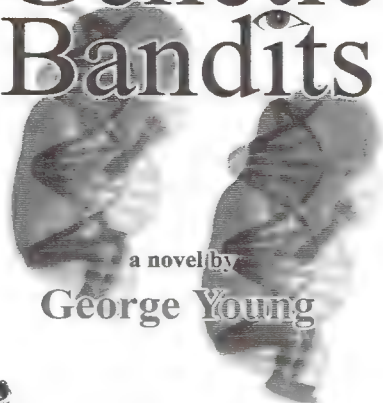
And then Rachel nodded and said, "I'll have some of that milk, and put a little rum in it. I'm froze sure."

That was always her way, my John's mother. When a subject was over, she'd announce it by changing to another. And then there'd be no further discussion on it. But a good woman, a loving mother, and far, far kinder than my own.

And that's where I end my story sir, with the happy part. Maybe you won't want it in your book, since it's supposed to be all in the words of folk from around here. As you might guess, I'm from away. 🍁

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The Comfort of Thunder

David J. Schwartz

WENDY LOOKED AT THE JUKEBOX WITH ITS TOKEN copy of *Motown's Greatest Hits* nestled uncomfortably between Hank Williams and Dixie Chicks. She punched in a Johnny Cash song and walked back to the bar. She had to squeeze past the leather-jacketed mass, sprawled over the bar with his head in his arms, who'd been there when they arrived. He was snoring loudly, and he smelled of beer and sweat.

Wendy sat at the bar next to her husband. Mike was staring at his empty beer glass with an expression that Wendy knew meant she shouldn't try talking to him. She did anyway.

"You okay?"

Mike made a face at the mirror behind the bar. "Fine," he said.

Wendy sipped her rum and coke, spun her stool and leaned back. Mike's cousin Emma waved to her from a booth. The Rolvaags made up more than half the patrons in the bar tonight, all drinking, even Connie, who was still underage. It looked more like an Irish wake than a Norwegian one.

The Rolvaags fit in easily, even those a generation removed from this tiny town where Mike's grandmother had died. Even Arthur, with his long university hair, seemed no more out of place than did the men at the end of the bar with the John Deere hats.

Wendy felt out of place. Just being in a town with one bar, one bank and no movie theater made her feel exposed. It wouldn't have been so bad, but since they'd heard—since she'd come home and found Mike throwing empty bottles at the wall, his face stained with tears—she'd felt raw and

vulnerable. She just wanted it all to be over.

Hank Williams came on, yodeling “Lonesome Blues,” and quickly faded into the background, leaving her alone in the crowded bar with her thoughts.

She’d hoped a few drinks might help, but the alcohol was not blurring her memory. It trickled between events, separating them one from another and lining them up like exhibits in a courtroom, to be examined and obsessed over at her leisure. She didn’t expect to sleep tonight unless she managed to drink quite a bit more.

After the wake they’d gone back to the house and dined on donated hot-dish. The tuna casserole Wendy had forced down was poignantly bland, as if spiced with the chef’s fatalistic grief. Wendy could almost see the woman hanging up her phone on the bad news, baking for the living in acknowledgment of the dead.

The wake had been exhausting, and after they ate Wendy had wanted to go back to the bed and breakfast and sleep until the funeral. But Mike and his cousins had changed from mourning clothes into jeans and come to the bar.

Here, seated in threes and fours in the stained wooden booths, reflected in small mirrors bearing beer company logos, eyes tearing from the cigarette smoke, they played pool and darts or sat and talked. They drank too much and laughed too loud with a strange Scandinavian stoicism that should have irritated her. But really, what else should they be doing?

LeeAnn Rimes came on the jukebox, whining “How Can I Live Without You?” Wendy drained her drink and ordered another.

At almost at the same moment, the man beside her lifted his head. His face was pale and pressed from the wood of the bar, and his thick red beard glistened with condensation. His leather jacket looked three sizes too small. He shuddered, and ordered a bottle of Pig’s Eye, a St. Paul beer named for the eye-patched bootlegger the city had once been called after.

Wendy remembered the man now. He’d been at the wake, outside the funeral home when she’d gone out to have a cigarette. He’d been leaning against a red pickup with its wheel-wells rusted round. He’d had a bottle then, something wrapped in a paper bag, and he’d sipped it slowly.

He’d met her eyes, and she’d been surprised at how sober his gaze was, and how eerily perceptive. “Beautiful day,” he’d said.

“Yes,” she’d answered, and neither of them said any more. After she’d gone back inside, she’d waited for him to enter; but he hadn’t, and when they left the funeral home the truck was gone.

He looked at her now, and raised his beer. “*Skål*,” he grunted, and drank.

She raised her own drink and was about to reply, but Mike picked that moment to start talking.

“I know it’s stupid,” he said, “but it seems like everything should stop, you know? Schools should close, planes should be grounded, baseball games should be canceled. The president should shut down the country and declare a day of mourning. No, forget that. People should just *know*,

without being told." He ordered another beer. "People don't even think twice when someone they don't know dies."

"She was a wonderful woman," said the red-haired man.

Mike narrowed his eyes. "You knew my grandmother?"

The big man nodded, his beard glistening.

"Who are you?"

The big man's speech wasn't even slurred. "No one you know."

"How do you know my grandmother?"

The other man shrugged. "I met her once."

"You a relative?"

"Sort of—a distant relative. From the old country."

Mike squinted at the red-haired man for a moment and then extended a hand. "Mike Rolvaag."

The man took the hand but hesitated a moment before saying, "Horagalles. Atli Horagalles."

"You're from Norway?" Wendy asked. "You don't have an accent."

Atli's long hair, held back with a leather cord, twitched as he shook his head. "I—my family has been in this country for some time now."

Garth Brooks came on the jukebox, singing "Thunder Road," and Wendy could hear Emma and Connie chanting along. Arthur was in the corner, flirting with the girl selling pull tabs.

Atli Horagalles itched at a stone-colored scar on his forehead and smiled at Wendy. "Could I bum a cigarette from you?"

Wendy nodded and handed him one of her Camels. He lit it from the matchbook on the bar and took a long drag. "You aren't planning to burn her, I hope."

Wendy was impressed with Atli Horagalles' voice. It was pleasantly masculine, deep but with a rich timbre. There was a picture inside his voice, of him singing drinking songs with Norwegian sailors. *Country* songs, she realized, or something very close.

Mike made a face at Atli's question. "Jesus Christ, no."

"Good." Atli flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "Will there be many people at the funeral?"

Mike waved an arm around the bar. "Enough."

"That's good. I remember my half-brother's funeral...many came. My stepmother invited everyone." He laughed. "She believed that if all things in the world wept for him he would be returned to us."

Inside Atli's words Wendy saw a world filled with weeping, people and animals and stones and trees all dripping with tears. She saw Atli himself standing on a mountain, wearing a shirt of metal rings and carrying a short-handled hammer. He was singing, and tears were rolling down his face.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"No." Atli tossed back the rest of his beer. "As your husband said, when someone you care for dies, it seems that the world should stop. On that day it almost seemed that it had. The sound of weeping filled the air, but there was one who did not weep." He stared at the one-eyed man on the Pig's Eye label. "My father's rage was terrible. Another beer, please," he

called to the bartender, a fireplug of a girl with bobbed black hair.

"I'm sorry," Wendy said.

Atli shook his head. "It is very much in the past. And there are times when I envy my half-brother the peace of death. Thank you," he said, accepting a fresh bottle from the bartender. "They say he will return after it's all over."

Wendy didn't say anything. She didn't know what he was talking about.

Mike was staring at Atli. "Why would we burn her?"

Wendy knew the tone—twice it had preceded sirens and court appearances. "He just means cremation," she said soothingly, but she was drowned out by Atli's response.

"Exactly!" he said, gesturing with his bottle. "It is done, certainly, but why? Better to return her to mother. You do plan to bury her?"

"Of course," Mike said.

Atli nodded. "A Christian burial."

"She was a very Christian woman," Mike said.

"She certainly was!" Atli said loudly. "She certainly was," he repeated, and laughed inexplicably. "I met her at a church, you understand. In Norway, near Bergen, there is a church, a magnificent building. *Fana kirke*, it is called, and it was built over eight hundred years ago. They burnt it, you know. A few years ago. Paganists. They rebuilt it, but..." He drained his beer. "We met there. I used to spend much of my time near there. It was a sacred place long before the church stood there."

The first twangy licks of "Folsom Prison Blues" played out over the jukebox, almost drowning out Atli's next words.

"I fell in love with her there."

Wendy nearly laughed, his remark was so unexpected. But Mike was off his bar stool in a second, and she put a hand out to stop him. He stood beside her, his jaw set.

"I hear that train a-comin'," Johnny Cash sang, and Atli sang along, oblivious to Mike. "It used to be a ship," he said then, "carried you to the next world. Now it's a train, more often than not."

He looked at Mike as if he had noticed him for the first time. He put out his cigarette and leered across at Mike. "How well did you know your grandmother?" he asked.

Mike stood close to Wendy, and she felt his tension. "As well as anyone alive," he said. "She raised me after my parents died."

Atli leaned toward Mike, brushing Wendy aside. "Did you know, then," he asked, his words falling like hammer blows, "that we were in love?"

The insinuation in Atli's voice was serpentine. He was looking for a fight, but it seemed to Wendy that it was for reasons that had nothing to do with her or Mike or Mike's grandmother. "There are times when I envy my half-brother the peace of death," he had said before.

Wendy took hold of her husband's arm and whispered, "He's baiting you, Mike. Forget it. Let's go."

Mike pushed her away, but gently.

Atli sipped at his beer and gave the man on the bottle the finger. The

stone-colored scar on his forehead reflected the lights behind the bar, and his eyes seemed to spark, like lightning dancing across a blackened sky. Mike was staring into those eyes, and while Wendy knew he had heard Atli's words, she felt sure that what really fed Mike's rage was something he saw in those eyes.

"You didn't really know her very well, did you?" Atli asked.

Mike lunged forward and locked his hands around Atli's throat, pressing him back against the bar.

Wendy heard Emma scream, but she didn't take her eyes off the two men struggling at the bar. Of the two, Atli drew her attention more strongly—he swelled under her gaze, until he had taken on the ridiculous proportions of a comic-book hero.

Atli growled, an animal bellow that shook the walls, and straightened with Mike's hands still locked around his throat. His eyes shone, and he laughed with a breath he shouldn't have been able to take.

Mike's cousins brushed past Wendy and tried to pull Mike away from Atli, but Mike held on. "Take it back!" he shouted. "Take it back, damn you!"

Atli shook his head and swept aside three of Mike's young cousins with a wave of his hand. "I should have known better," he whispered, so softly that Wendy wondered if she was the only one who had heard him.

"Let go of him," said the fireplug bartender, and shoved the twin barrels of a shotgun in Mike's face. Mike didn't even look at her, and Wendy started to scream.

Then she saw, quite clearly, Atli's hand come down on the shotgun and twist it out of the bartender's grasp. She saw it clearly, but was never quite sure if it had been real. No one should be able to move that fast.

Atli pulled Mike's hands from his neck and placed the shotgun in them. Mike immediately stopped shouting and stood flushed, breathing in ragged gasps.

"It's loaded," Atli told Mike in a monotone, a flat sound that barely crawled out from under the steam-chug guitar of the music. "Shoot me."

Mike shook his head, holding the gun slackly in his arms. He looked around for Wendy. When he saw her, he burst into tears.

Atli's sigh deflated his super-heroic proportions until he was again just a big man in a leather jacket. He placed a hand on Mike's shoulder.

"You were right. It wasn't true. I fell in love with your grandmother, but she never knew of me.

"It wasn't in the way you think. Your grandmother was beautiful, yes, but I learned to look past the physical a long time ago. What impressed me was her faith, her acceptance. She knew she would die someday, and she was ready for it, whenever it might come. So many mortals fear their deaths...they do not see the reward it holds. Your grandmother knew."

He took the shotgun from Mike's hands and passed it to the bartender. "I have been too often in the company of Loki, to deceive you so. But listen well to what I am about to say, for it is the truth.

"Long ago on the Oslo fjord, in a place called Oseberg, a wealthy woman died. She was rich with land and livestock and children. Her

husband had died some years before, but she had taken his property and doubled its value and doubled it again, for she was a shrewd woman. She lived many years, and when she died, her family went to great lengths to ease her voyage to the next world. They brought up her largest ship from the harbor and set it in a depression in the ground. In its hold they placed everything she would need for her journey: food and spices for cooking, fine beds with mattresses of down, sledges, wagons, and all manner of beautiful things, that she might enjoy the same quality of life she had in this world. Then they slaughtered the finest stock for her journey, and her most faithful maidservant accompanied her mistress into the next world.

“When the ship was filled to the gunwales with treasures, they covered it with earth. The mound they created was one hundred fifty feet long and twenty feet high. It stood for centuries as a monument to her.”

Atli looked around the bar. No one spoke. Wendy met Atli’s gaze, her mind still reeling with the images of the mourners, the treasures, the immense labors lavished on the dead woman.

Finally Atli spoke again. “That is how I would honor Marion, your mother, grandmother, and friend. Were I able to, I would declare a day of mourning among all things in the world. But the age of such gestures has passed, and today the death of one counts for only so much, no matter how many lives have been touched by that one.”

He looked at the floor and seemed to shrink once more, into himself and his beard and his jacket. He turned to lift his bottle from the bar, and for the first time Wendy saw clearly what it said on the back of his jacket. “Hammer Bros. Construction,” it read, with a picture of a short-handled hammer above the words.

Atli turned. “To Marion,” he said, and drank.

Everyone drank, and when they finished, Atli Horagalles was gone.

IT RAINED ALL NIGHT. LYING IN THE DARK, THE BED SPINNING BENEATH HER, Wendy listened to the thunder and the soft accompaniment of Mike’s snoring. The rain fell in her dreams, spattering the monolith that was Atli Horagalles, who stood with his arms raised to the dark skies.

By morning the rain had stopped, but the clouds remained, clinging to the treetops and blocking the sun. Wendy sipped coffee and watched the cousins rise bleary-eyed and mumble greetings to one another.

They picked at fruit and pastry and one by one showered and primped. They put on their best clothes, but took pains not to look too good. They hurried to get ready and then stood awkwardly about, making small jokes and starting small arguments, both quickly forgotten.

As they arrived at the church it started to hit her. They took Mike aside with the rest of the grandsons, and he walked in beside the coffin, looking strong and scared. Wendy was crying before the minister opened his mouth.

She thought of the funerals she’d been to: her own grandparents, all of them, were long dead, and her father had died just two years past. She imagined rolling all that grief into one horrible loss, and wept at Mike’s bright eyes and set jaw.

It was still cloudy as they drove to the cemetery. By that time Wendy had cried herself hoarse, and she sat silent between Emma and Connie as they followed the hearse.

It was a cool morning, and she huddled around the grave with the others while the pallbearers strained up the hill to the gravesite. Mike's uncles began crying, one by one. Seeing their always unruffled faces tremble, their always unsurprised eyes fill with children's tears, made it seem nothing could ever be right again.

She had to turn away, and then she saw the truck parked up the cemetery road, the red Dodge. It was empty. Through the blurring of tears she realized that Atli Horagalles was right in front of her, standing beneath the boughs of a denuded maple.

"I know who you are," she said.

"Who I was," he said. "I'm not him anymore. The world has changed, and I had to change with it."

"Why did you come?"

"Even I am mortal, finally. I know how I will die, but not when. People like Marion help me to accept that."

"But you wanted Mike to kill you," she said.

"I know. It was a moment of weakness."

"He's got two assaults on his record already. He would have gotten life."

"Yes." It was clear that he saw no need for an apology. "There was a time when that sort of rage was valued."

Wendy said nothing.

"She will travel well," said the man who was a god. "I am not a poor shaman. I will see her safely to the next world."

"And after that?"

"East, perhaps." He smiled. "I used to travel there often, killing trolls—but that was a long time ago, and none live there now save the All-Father. The others have scattered."

"If people knew..."

"It is better they do not. Few would believe, and nothing would change. I, for one, am content to be just a man, until Ragnarok comes at last." He looked beyond Wendy. "I want to apologize for last night," he said.

"It's all right," Mike said, laying a hand on Wendy's shoulder. "I was drunk. Thank you for what you said."

"I meant it." He turned. "Goodbye," he said, and walked slowly back to his truck.

"What did he say to you?" Mike asked as the red pickup turned out of the cemetery.

Wendy was still finding her way through the images in the thunder god's words. When she finally told Mike Atli Horagalles's true name, the pickup was gone. ♣

The Trickster's Lot

Lena DeTar

THE WIND CARRIED THE SCENT OF SAGEBRUSH and mint as the god wandered around the small hills, sticking to a low-bellied creep in the shadowed gullies. New houses had sprung up here since last year, at least a dozen, and from behind their fences the yards smelled of starlings and foreign trees.

The Abajos rose compact to the northwest, black in the setting sun. Blue Mountains, the home of the Sweet Alice hills and the fabled valleys of flaxen grass, piñon, juniper and winterfat, cricket, canyon wren, kangaroo rat and raven. The god had found a few snakes hiding underneath the lupins of the highlands, and they told of a bounty in the peopled valleys. Never so many sweet hairless mice, never so lush grasses, never sunnier slabs. But beware the lawnmowers that came out each seventh day. The god lifted its nose.

Magpie flew by, stopping mid-haloo in favor of dodging a power line. Once settled, it cackled the year's news. A fire in September had come close to hitting the human settlement, but magical red water-spouting things had worked the wild force back and then smothered it completely. The winter had been harsher, an eleventh year, so that was expected. The dump was being fenced off and closed on a seven-day cycle as well. More freedom but fewer pickings. Its hatches were good, Magpie said, a fledgling now a fledger, another almost flown.

The god lowered its ears slightly and yawned. When it asked resignedly if anyone had put out an offering, Magpie just laughed and laughed as though it had just heard the season's best joke. The god scratched its left ear, then barked a farewell to the corvid and padded off. It couldn't help thinking, Everett had been right. Things had changed very quickly.

Inside a wooden-fenced corral in one outer valley rested several calves and their mothers. The god circled around the group, amused at their frightened response. Finally a barking came from inside the nearby house and a light turned on, so the god put its tail between its legs and ran back under the fence. A calf was too big anyway.

In the next yard were several abandoned chicken coops. The god had been known to eat eggs when offered, but it did not like the way the male versions of the strange birds always tried to peck out its eyes and chase it away. What it did like were the chickens. Cooked, they would be absolutely heavenly. Even raw, they tasted divine. So the people had not left an offering? It would have to be tricky to get what it wanted, the god sighed. It had to survive somehow, the same as all other creatures with bellies rumbling and tumbling and eating their owners from the inside.

Soon the god found itself trotting down the sidewalk of a green-grassed development. Green bluegrass, in late spring. In the past, only the teosinte and juniper had been green all year, unless you were the maidenhair or the phragmites lucky enough to find a year-round spring. The backs of pueblos and caves had been painted with the color in hopes of a good harvest. In those days, there had been more offerings than the god could eat, as well as stories to hear in the winter evenings, music and dances to join. Then the rains had stopped. The tribes from the north had filled up the higher plateaus, and the phragmites climbers had moved south, chasing a storm cloud.

And then the cows had come, eating the grass down to the rock, chasing out the elk and deer, leaving scalp-sized droppings to bake in the sun. The men with the cows—never women, the god had been quick to notice—had been dusty and pale. Though never turning down a mysterious desert maiden in the night, it chuckled. The cows had slowly gone too, making way for these magical cars that left as excretion a special black path that bent in the noon heat. The people that drove them, for indeed it was all people and not just powerful shamans, lived in entire-pueblo-sized houses of wood and plastic and glass. They ate food from distant lands, summoned in by more magical cars. And the houses urinated on the bluegrass, and kept the desert spirits away. The god felt its hair rise on its mantle.

There would be no offering tonight, it knew. Hunger ripped at its belly like a whole quiver of arrows.

Dance me back, it thought.

THE RAIN WAS FIERCE, LASHING AT THE GOD'S FUR AND PENETRATING THROUGH skin to bone. The god snapped at the sheet of water, almost growling. Nearby, a soaked band of humans rested in the shelter of rock beneath their lightening-burnt and washed out pueblo. In a few years, they would be raided by a village that kept their corn in stone houses, and turn the idea into the first sacred kiva. The god yipped at the cold, and ducked under with them, pulling off its fur and becoming a person too. The girl on the end made room, and he shook out his pelt.

“Have you been traveling?” the girl asked. “It is an unfortunate night. We have few fires to shine for your welcome.”

“I was asleep when the rain started,” the god said, taking in her huge black eyes, the fineness of her cheekbones, the even tone of her copper kindling-lit skin. “And now I am wet. Might I borrow your blanket, to dry my hair?”

The girl shrugged and handed it over. Underneath she wore only an apron and a skirt. The god set the soaked blanket down near the kindling. “Thank you, but I am still not dry. Might I borrow your apron?”

The girl shrugged a little more hesitantly, then handed it over. Her breasts were small and dark-nippled, and toned as beautifully as her face. The god accepted the smock, and wiped his fur with it, smearing his scent while ringing his tail. “Thank you,” he said, and looked her over once more. “But my hair is still dripping. Might I borrow your skirt?”

“All right,” the girl said, “but you must give me something in return.”

“Yes, yes!” the god panted, as she untied her skirt strings, revealing dark pubic hair that curled like a fern’s tendrils. He couldn’t stand to wait for her to pass it over, so he snatched the leather and immediately began to copulate with her. When they were both spent, the girl let the god dress her again. “You are beautiful,” he said, happy with this offering. A part of the god only felt a shadow of the pleasure, grasping for the original feeling. But this was a thousand years past, and would not fill tonight’s need.

“You are to give me something in return,” the girl said, curling up in her blanket again. “I would like a basket that does not burn in a fire.”

“Oh, no,” the god said. “That is a secret I am not allowed to give. The cliff-swallows have kept it guarded, and have made me promise to never tell.”

“Cliff swallows!” The girl sat in thought. “Of course! They build their nests from the mud by rivers!”

“Oh no,” the god said. Thinking quickly, it remembered what was coming next. Something about its entrails being extracted and leaving it with an awful stomach ache because it couldn’t defecate for an entire year in the dance hall for the dead. And getting its eyes pecked out. Again.

Dance me forward, it thought.

THE VALLEY WAS EMPTY. THE GOD WANDERED UP THROUGH THE HILLS, TO THE ponderosa’s domain. Lightning-struck trunks thrust themselves skyward in an echo of the fury that had destroyed their life. Even here among its brothers the coyotes, there were few signs of people; no garbage wrappers, no branded carcasses. It must be a lean time, the god thought. But then it spied a single campfire. Glowing far below.

Turning to the raven on the left, it asked to borrow the longest feather on each of her wings. The raven, busy sucking grubs out of a log the god had turned over for her, just laughed. But while she wasn’t looking, the god quickly snatched them from her, and flew out over the rusty cliff and out toward the orange sparkle of fire.

Two men sat by the fire in a steeply walled box canyon. They had no

mules, nor cows, just a bunch of maps and books and an old guitar. The god crept up to listen to their conversation, planning to use cunning once it found out what they were here for. Two were harder than one to trick—much harder, but the god had done it before. If they had been three, it probably would have turned tail.

“So Everett Ruess wandered from here on down to the San Juan. Some guess it was a terrible stormy night, and he prob'ly drowned.”

“That's one theory. They didn't find 'is donkeys till three months later. How would they know which day it was he disappeared? Personally, I like to think he married a Navajo woman and settled down, still living in a nursing home today. This is where the donkeys were found?”

“I'm pretty sure, box canyon, fits the description. You know, I reckon God just took 'im. Flash of light, and he was gone.”

“Not God, Vaughn, I bet it was the Spirit of the Trail.”

The god's ears perked. Maybe they were expecting it! Maybe they would have an offering. Their conversation dwindled, and one of the men poured some hot water over a tea bag and set it on the sandstone near the pillow of his bedroll. With a “G'night, Ken,” he snuggled down into it. And started to dream.

The god couldn't believe it. It was an offering. The first in years! It wouldn't need to dance back for scraps tonight! Feeling grateful, the god planted a Wandering Trail Spirit seed in the man, and wagged its tail as he smiled a little in his sleep. The man would find Everett, if only for one night, and only as a spirit in a dream. The hungry part of the god wished bitterly that it could be inside that dream too.

It was a strange feeling, feeling grateful for a real offering while in the middle of a dance-back. Already the god could see the seed growing into a poem inside the man's head. It laughed, a yipping echo against the dark sandstone cliffs. But the echo of that offering was bitter in its sweetness. The god shook itself. Dance me forward, it whimpered.

THE VIEW WAS LIKE LOOKING DOWN ON THE STARS, IF THE STARS CEASED TO twirl and twinkle and had fallen out of the patterns the Twin War Gods had devised. An air-boat cometed from the center of the lights, off and up through the clouds and beyond the god's senses. When humans had learned to fly, they gained a part of the divine. And though like this god's bout with raven, the consequences had come with a fury at first, from the humans the gods had never gotten their feathers back.

The air was cleaner than it had been in a century or two.

The god bounded down into the settlement, the joy of the hunt on four legs filling it for a split second as it crashed through the brush. The valley smelled of ozone, which had something to do with that flying boat earlier. A loud click echoed through the buildings, and the god cringed, fearing rifles. But instead, the fireless lights all shut off. A breeze swept through the deserted canyon. Slowly, with a pungent smell, the buildings began to decompose into clouds of water steam and carbon dioxide.

The god bit at one geyser, and pulled back a burned muzzle. Quickly,

as pools of hot water started to fill around it, the god jumped and dodged its way up to a slight mesa overlooking the melting settlement. It sat down to rest, when a sudden hand caught his muzzle and middle all at once.

"Somebody leave their dog?" an old voice croaked. The god summoned up its fiercest wolf growl and escaped from the grasp easily. The woman drew back, brandishing a hastily grabbed broom. "All right, stay away."

The god growled again. The affront was more embarrassing than frightening, and this god was tired of being made a fool by mere humans. The woman backed slowly into a small cabin, and the god followed her closely, hackles raised.

"What do you want, food? I have food, just don't come any closer." She opened an upright box in the corner of the room, and pulled out a plastic bag of chicken. Cooked. The god drooled in spite of itself.

"Here, take it."

"Thank you," the god said, wagging its tail. "Where have all the people gone?"

The old woman snorted. "A talking coyote. Or are you a gen-mod?"

"I am a god," the god said, between mouthfuls. "I take many forms." It couldn't reach the corner of the bag, from the way his teeth had ripped it, so it pulled its fur off and turned into the kind of person to fit the old woman's desire. Fingers were better for grasping. "Please, where have the people gone?" the god asked, his voice trembling with age. It was a request, and the answer was another offering. He would owe this woman dearly.

"They've left, they've gone to hell in a spaceship. They're on their way to another planet."

"Oh." The fifth world, then. What did that mean? That this world would be destroyed? The basket people and the pueblos never said what had happened to the people of the other worlds, once they had left them behind. This was something to ponder. Perhaps owl would know, sitting outside the window. But first a gift in return, for this old woman.

The god drew up a recipe in a shaky hand, full of herbs and cactus and sand and some lizard tails, then dipped a few of the woman's hairs in a bowl of water and sang a prayer. Before its eyes, the old woman dropped her wrinkles to the floor, her yellow eyes cleared to white. A lithe virgin stood before him.

The girl bowed deeply, tears in her eyes.

The god didn't want to stay to find out that, indeed, the world would be destroyed that year, and that it would be blamed for tricking that crone/virgin by giving her youth for such a short span. Dance me now, it said, with a wistful howl.

SCRAPS, MERELY SCRAPS. THE GOD LAY PANTING IN THE SHADE OF A FENCE, just outside the bluegrass's domain. Shade, at night. The lights from this house shone brightly, as bright as day and brighter inside. Song blared in the night, loud with drums, full of electricity and lightening. Young people thrashed about inside, drinking, laughing, singing, smoking from

little rolls.

Scraps. It was not satisfied. The god might have to cycle through all the days, to dull the pain enough tonight. It had been fourteen years in a row without an offering, now fifteen. Magpie was right to laugh. It wondered if searching further for an offering in this time would be fruitful, even in the form of a person.

Only the events of this night were hidden from it; to dance forward and back through nights of plenty and nights of nothing might stave off a little hunger. But fifteen years could rack up a terrible pain, and the desert showed no mercy, even for its own. If it died tonight, as all things do, it would come back next year after a long dead sleep without setting foot in the dance hall of the dead. To win its body back after that would require a great debt or great cunning. To face that debt on fifteen years of shrunken stomach would be more pain than it cared to bear.

Dance me...back, it said, feeling pain in its heart and stomach.

THE NIGHT—THIS NIGHT—THE GOD GRINNED IN SATISFACTION. IT HAD REVISITED this night many times, even on nights when it did not need scraps to thin the pain.

In the glow of a campfire surrounded by sleeping or grazing mules, sat a young man painting words onto a page with green watercolor. Nearby was another book of paintings, next to that was a ream of paper filled with writings in a scrolling black script. The young man had brown hair, a sharp sunburned nose, and a ready smile. Navajo silver glinted on his wrists, and a poncho covered his strong but thin upper body. The god panted slightly, then pulled off its fur approached him as a maiden.

"Hello," the man said, as she stepped into the firelight. He looked intensely at her, eyes full of wonder and praise. "You're not lost, are you?"

The god shook her head.

"Well, I'll be. I don't know exactly where we are, but you're welcome to stay. What can I offer you?"

The god blanched. She hadn't even started to use her wiles. With a dark nailed hand, she indicated the can of food smoldering in the fire.

"Food, huh? You want some water?"

The god bowed as she took the offered canteen, and drank deeply. It was a sacred offering. She owed him nearly anything he asked now.

"My name's Everett. What's yours?"

"The Trickster."

"Coyote."

"Yes."

"But you're beautiful."

"For you."

He flicked the can of beans out of the fire expertly, then opened them with a sharp knife, holding the can in two layers of bunched-up poncho. "You don't mind sharing a fork?"

The god shook her head, smiling. If she wasn't careful, she'd lose more

tonight than she gained. "I am in your debt."

"Could I—you're so beautiful. You wouldn't mind if I painted you? Quickly?"

The god cocked her head. "Is that all you wish?"

"Yes."

She nodded and sat as he instructed her, staring over the fire at his hasty sketches and then in wonder as he raised her image from a flat page. The moon rose, half full, over the canyon rim. A night breeze flickered in her long black hair as he sat in concentration. Slowly he rose, carrying the picture over to her, to show her the likeness. In the face on his page was all the mystery and harshness of the desert, all the wonder and kindness of a woman, and the glint in her black eyes made the god think the portrait might impulsively get up off the page and run away to a dance or a feast without warning. It took even the god's breath away, as she stared into her own eyes.

As the boy who had imaged her so perfectly bent near her, she leaned over and kissed his mouth. He acted surprised at first, but let her lead him to his bedroll where she tried to give back what he had given her.

Food, a basic gift, must be repaid by an asking or a telling. Water, a sacred gift, must be repaid in kind, or with something of great value. Admiration, a heart's gift, must be repaid in exacting respect, in love and food and song.

After he came into her, and lay in spent pleasure, the god knew that her debt had not been repaid. He had pleased her even in his own throes of passion.

"What can I give you, that would fit your heart's desire?" she said, lying in his sweaty arms. "Anything, even if I take the blame for it later. You have given me gifts and offerings four times over."

"Oh," he sighed, staring at the stars, in the silence of the crickets and wind. "I don't know. If I could have absolutely anything...I guess I want it to be like this forever. I love it here. But I'm not as young as I was, and the cowboys are coming in on the trains. The world's getting faster, and I'm being left behind. All I want to do is walk the trails, and paint, and write, and sing, and dance, and inspire people from time to time."

"I see." The god pulled herself out of his arms. "You want to be a spirit."

He laughed. "But I'm a white man."

"You are a man," she corrected. The god looked around herself, finding a branch of snakeweed and a branch of sage, the tip of ricegrass, a fire ember, and the colored paints. A drop of sacred water, a feather dipped in red color, a sand splash, and a river stone. She danced around him, weaving patterns into the air, spirals and zigzags and the path to the stars and the dance hall of the dead. He watched her with amusement, as though he didn't understand the gravity of the situation. The god pulled him up, naked but for the silver jewelry, and set him on the path.

"You must climb it. It goes very high, and sheer, but not steeper than a redrock maze, and not farther than your home."

He had nothing to say, for once. The poet, speechless. He found his hat, self-consciously, and straightened it over his clipped brown hair. Everett climbed the path, and shimmered as he went.

The god sighed, missing him already. She would see him in the dance hall at the end of this torturous evening, if she made it through. The god put its fur back on. If it didn't, another year would pass without him. It whispered softly: dance me now.

THE SPRINKLERS IN THE THROBBING HOUSE CAME ON, AND A FEW WILD PEOPLE came out and danced in them.

"We've made this such an oasis," someone's comment drifted from the porch, "it's almost like we've crushed the desert out."

"The air's still dry."

"Yeah, but I haven't heard coyotes howling for almost three years. Not a single rattler-sighting in town for just as long. It's not right."

"We have skunks all the time."

"Okay, fine. But they're trashy."

"I went down to the rez today, a woman was having a baby and Martin got called to deliver, so I tagged along. They're having a dance tonight. I guess it's a holiday or something."

"Cool. What for?"

"Something about honoring Coyote. Changing of the seasons, something."

The god listened with ears so tense they quivered. It knew people had not forgotten! But the place they meant when they said that strange word was miles and miles and miles away. Not even on Raven's wings could it get that far in one night, even if it cared to risk getting its eyes pecked out. No—but these people were gullible.

A lure. A trick, to turn the atheists into animists; the god raised its muzzle and howled all its hunger just as one electric song ended, and before another started up. The cry echoed high in the night, a series of descending mournful yaps. A dog next door started barking. The music blared once more.

"Shit, did you hear that?"

"Do you think it's near by?"

"Probably looking in on the Valle's cattle."

"Poor thing's probably hungry."

"Oh, it's not a good idea to feed wildlife."

"Hey, it's a holiday, right? Just this once."

"Well, it's your house. If it comes back tomorrow just know, I told you so."

"I wouldn't mind. I love the wildlife."

The god streaked up the wild sandy hill, hiliaria, rice grass and snake-weed, tail wagging with hope. It stood on the crested hilltop, just etched into the mountains behind, where a sharp eye might pick it out. The woman who opened the gate, carrying a pan full of raw chicken, looked suddenly familiar.

Ah. She was no virgin, and she was no crone. But the god knew it would see her again in a few years. Even now, after the party had died down and the god slunk to the pan, it defecated a sign of "friend" near the fence. She would have desert visitors plenty, with or without a pan of chicken.

And in the morning, the god would feast and drink, beautiful in the arms of the favorite in its retinue, in the splendor of the dance hall of the dead. The god howled once more, in thanks, and found its own capering way up the star path. ✱

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Conjure Me

Jarret Keene

AN OPERATING TABLE. A SCALPEL. THIS WAS JOSEPHINE'S dream. The Good Doctor was carving her up. Each incision released a torrent of blood. His grinning face was splattered, his apron drenched. She screamed and screamed. Suddenly it was over, the straps removed, the blood gone, and he handed her a bouquet of red roses. "I'm sorry," he said, tears running down his face. "But these instruments are useless." His eyes rolled back, his body began to convulse, and she watched in horror as a black cottonmouth emerged from the roses and crawled against her thigh.

IN THE MORNING SHE WALKED THROUGH THE COURTYARD BEHIND HER quarters. She removed her robe and stepped into the laundry basin. The charcoal was still glowing; the water was warm. She lathered a rag and scrubbed her neck and arms. Afterward she put on her new white dress and slippers. She pulled back her hair and tied it with a red ribbon, twisting strands of her hair into curls that hung before each cheek. She fastened the gold earrings the Good Doctor had given her. She was proud as she examined herself in the fractured mirror above the sink. Then she went into the house to prepare the Good Doctor's breakfast.

She made a spoon bread and veal hash. She brought out silk napkins and the finest silver and placed a bowl of fig preserves in the center of the table. She took a moment to think of their future together, and the prospect of a wedding breakfast bloomed in her imagination. But her fantasy was soon spoiled by a noise upstairs. It was the Good Doctor's wife,

Celeste, moaning again. Josephine listened for his voice. Usually the Good Doctor would soothe Celeste with gentle words, then call for Josephine to bring the calomel and a little wine. Right now he remained quiet, most likely using a cold wet cloth to wipe perspiration from the dying woman's brow.

A few blocks away the cathedral bells tolled the hour. As if provoked by the clanging, the cannon in the Place d'Armes fired. The powder blasts were intended to purify the disease-ridden air and stave off the bayou's fetid vapors. Inside the Good Doctor's home, the windows shook and the china cups vibrated on their saucers. Accustomed to the sudden explosions, Josephine did not flinch but continued cooking. She had just started the coffee when he came downstairs. She could not remember him ever having looked so fatigued, and yet despite his rumpled clothes and sallow complexion, he was handsome beyond measure.

"You need rest," she told him.

He placed his hands on a chair and leaned forward. "She must go to the hospital."

Josephine repressed the urge to kiss him. She didn't know anyone who had left the Charity Hospital alive.

"Is she that ill?"

He nodded and sat down wearily at the table. "I gave her something to make her sleep."

The water in the kettle was boiling. She poured it over the coffee grounds. She cut a slice of bread and scooped hash on top of it. When he was done, she approached, stroking his wispy, blonde hair. Determined, she let her hands linger against his cheek.

He petted her arm and said, chokingly, "I'll never forgive myself for allowing her to stay."

When the epidemic had begun to spread, he stayed behind out of a sense of duty. On her part, Celeste would not leave her husband's side. Now it was summer, and everyone in the quarantined city was dying. Victims lay on the floors of the Charity Hospital, where the Good Doctor had volunteered before his wife contracted the fever. Ever since the Sorceress had announced colored people were immune, Josephine stopped worrying about getting sick.

"I forgive you," she said, pressing her mouth to his throat.

At first, he remained impassive; he did not succumb. But she was certain his defenses were ruined from exhaustion, so she removed her dress and untied her hair.

He took her on the parlor table.

As he dozed on the sofa, she went upstairs to retrieve the *gris-gris* from under the wife's mattress. It was a small chamois bag that contained strands of hair plaited together; scrapings of dried blood, hers obtained from a menstrual napkin, the Good Doctor's from a towel he'd used to dab a shaving cut; a tiny heart of red wax. The room smelled terrible. Surrounded by mosquito netting, the dying woman lay asleep in her great mahogany bed, drawing ragged breaths. Standing naked over her,

Josephine reached inside herself to smear the Good Doctor's seed on the *gris-gris*. She returned the charm to the mattress. Briefly, she considered pressing a pillow to the bleached face. But direct intervention was unnecessary. The spell had been improved; the woman would be dead by nightfall. She would never make it to the hospital.

Josephine bathed in the porcelain tub, using the expensive, sweet-smelling soaps. It was her second bath today, and she felt a sumptuous delight in drying herself with her lover's inscribed towel. She redressed and walked out into the yard to gather sprays of jasmine that grew upon the trellis and carried them inside. She placed them in a vase atop the mantelpiece. Throughout the morning, she sat quietly in the parlor and worked on her sewing, rocking back and forth in her chair. She filed her nails with the dying woman's emery board. All the while the cannon boomed and the dogs howled and the death carts clattered. Finally, there was a muffled whimper from the sofa. It was the Good Doctor, having just awakened, his face buried in a cushion, weeping. She put her arm around him and felt his body shudder.

"Hush," she said. "It's almost over."

IN THE AFTERNOON, THEY RECEIVED A VISITOR, DR. TALLANT, THE HEALTH Warden in charge of the Fourth District and, confronted with the spectacle of mass death, an unrepentant drunk. He prescribed whiskey for medicinal as well as inspirational purposes, and at dusk he could be found hovering near the chain-ganged slaves in the cemetery, letting them swig mightily from one of his many bottles, keeping them at their grim task of digging trenches for the growing piles of corpses.

"Liberal and frequent," he said. "Liberal and frequent potations of whiskey will rescue us from the Black Angel." He was pouring himself another drink in the Good Doctor's study. The Good Doctor refrained, as liquor made him tired and careless. Instead, he sat numbly in his leather chair, checking his pulse against the clock on his desk, waiting for the cocaine to do its work.

"More rumors," Tallant continued, spilling whiskey on his vest. "There's a shortage of gravediggers, and the people are fearful. They suspect we're burning bodies."

"Well, are we?"

"Of course not. The stench would be hellish. Even worse than the tar."

"Still. Perhaps the Roman custom isn't such a bad idea."

Tallant snorted. "Nero's human lamps. No, what we need are more niggers. Big, strong, stupid, fever-resistant, liquor-prone niggers. Give me just twenty, and we could bury the entire city."

"Be careful what you wish for." The Good Doctor was about to go upstairs. He was gradually achieving clinical detachment. He no longer saw the dying woman as his wife, but as yet another condemned patient mutilated by absurd treatments. He felt detached from his own actions, from the world that was collapsing around him. He was burdened with the awful knowledge that nothing he did mattered. His abilities to heal had been all along a mirage. Would everything be taken from him? He wanted

to get down on his knees and plead for Celeste's recovery. Or else demand a speedier oblivion. Either way he was running out of tears.

Tallant pulled out tobacco and rolled a cigarette.

The Good Doctor shook his head. "I'm taking Celeste to the hospital."

"I would not recommend it."

"The Sisters of Charity might help."

Tallant sighed, struck a match.

"Nothing works," insisted the Good Doctor. "I've tried everything. Bleeding. Blistering. Quinine."

"Calomel?"

"It ulcerated her gums and tongue. Her teeth fell out."

"The fever spares no one, not even the Sisters. Better she passes away here, where it's clean and quiet and sane."

The Good Doctor swallowed and said, "Yesterday three fever victims walked out of the hospital. In sound health."

"Easily explained. They were not fever victims, but individuals with minor complaints who assumed they were stricken. No miracle, sir."

"I'm killing her." He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What?"

"That damnable opium. I'm killing her with it."

Again the cannon discharged. It seemed, at least to the Good Doctor, that Death himself was bombarding the city.

Tallant silently raised his glass, as if saluting the noise.

"Let it come down," muttered the Good Doctor to no one in particular. He shuffled the papers on his desk in search of an editorial from the *Crescent*.

"Another rumor," he said. "The witch-woman plans to resurrect the dead." He handed over the clipping.

"I've heard," said Tallant, waving it away.

Josephine knocked and entered the study. "She's awake, sir."

"All right," said the Good Doctor. His voice thickened. He was hesitant to say anything more, fearing Tallant might discern their secret.

When she left, the Good Doctor wanted to ask Tallant if he thought Josephine was beautiful, but the question was foolish. Her wide hips and round breasts, her dark hair and green eyes. At seventeen, she was already a vision. Indeed, the single flaw in her beauty was that she was aware of it.

"Tomorrow night," Tallant continued, "there will be a ceremony in the bayou."

"Will it be stopped?"

"No. The authorities are too busy. Let the niggers have their little party. Soon we'll all be food for worms."

"Josephine said the strangest thing the other day. She said the fever doesn't attack colored people."

"She's in for a shock," said Tallant, laughing.

"I'm a doctor. This is a doctor's house. Where does she get an idea like that?"

THE OPIUM WAS WEARING OFF. CELESTE DRIFTED IN AND OUT OF CONSCIOUSNESS. During the day, the window was kept closed, but now, at night, the burning had lessened and the cannon had stopped, so Josephine threw the shutters open. She lit a lantern and pulled a chair to the bed. With the bowl in her lap, she wrung the excess water from the rags. Her hands shook badly as she bathed the dying woman's forehead. She set the rags down for a moment to collect herself. She wanted very much to strangle the Good Doctor's wife.

She brought to mind the afternoon she and the Good Doctor rode through the city in his carriage, from one clothes shop to the next. He never considered his own attire, always settling for old shirts and shabby coats. He was only meticulous when it came to choosing for Josephine dresses that were elegant and simple. He bought shoes for her and an expensive pair of green silk gloves. She wore the gloves in the coach on the way back. "Do you like them?" he said. That week his wife had displayed the early symptoms of the fever. Josephine hoped the Good Doctor would soon be hers.

"Oh yes," she said.

THE NEXT EVENING, WHEN THE GOOD DOCTOR'S WIFE REFUSED TO DIE, JOSEPHINE went to see the Sorceress, Queen of the Voodoo. Some people said the Sorceress consorted with Satan, who sometimes appeared to her in the form of a snake called Zombi and protected her from the whites. Other people said she was a thief and a blackmailer. The mistress of a legion of men. That she had committed murder. So it had seemed likely that she possessed the means to realizing Josephine's desires—the magic a slave girl needed to conquer a white doctor. But now the slave girl's heart was filled with anger and disappointment. The charm the Sorceress had promised would bind the Good Doctor to her had failed.

She stepped out into Canal Street. The air was a scourge of buzzing, biting mosquitoes. The tar barrels positioned on every corner palled the city with smoke. For weeks people had been pouring out of New Orleans, breaking the rules of quarantine. Everywhere porters were securing trunks atop carriages as waiting passengers—the plague clearly visible in their mottled features—coughed into stained handkerchiefs. The poor hurried along the sidewalks, luggage and children in tow, out of breath, on the verge of collapse. Josephine had no idea how these doomed souls expected to evade the armed sentries patrolling the bayous. The streets also swarmed with packs of stray dogs. Josephine watched a street cleaner carefully proffer a poisoned sausage to a mutt, its mouth flecked with foam. She passed a thin, bespectacled white man wearing a heavy black coat, clean-shaven, plugs in his nostrils, who tipped his hat and smiled at her. In his mouth was a piece of orange peel.

Josephine drew her shawl around her and pushed on.

She went to the edge of the city, where the cobblestones abruptly ended. Gripping the pole of a gaslight, she stopped to rest and survey her surroundings as bits of afternoon light faded from the sky. Beyond stretched a dank, swamplike region spotted with grassy places. Along the

riverbank, a servant was ruthlessly beating a carpet with a stick. Josephine made the mistake of drawing a big breath and inhaled an insect. The coughing fit was severe. She applied some more camphor to her skin. After dabbing her slick forehead with a handkerchief, she plunged into the bayou's darkness.

The moon was full, lighting up the moss that hung from the oak branches, reflecting off the waters of St. John's Bayou, but the stars remained invisible, as though the moon had siphoned their energies. Lightning flashed; thunder rumbled in the distance. Fireflies flickered among the palmetto leaves. A frog croaked so obscenely that Josephine felt a chill run through her body.

She reached the clearing in time. The Sorceress was still reclining on her throne, a wicker chair with a high back atop a wooden platform. She wore a short garment made of scarlet handkerchiefs sewn together. Around her waist was a heavy blue cord, and about her shoulders a red shawl with black fringe. Her hair was bound in a *tignon*, its gray-streaked knots standing above her head. Her scrawny feet were bare and on each leg was an anklet ornamented with tiny bells. Her bead necklace hung to her waist, and gold bracelets covered her arms from wrists to elbows. Shiny rings adorned her fingers. The Sorceress sat, motionless, eyes wide open and staring at the fire in the center of the clearing. Her followers were nowhere in sight, but Josephine could sense them moving around, stalking the perimeter of shadows.

A black rooster strutted from behind the throne. The Sorceress limped towards it. She picked it up by its feet, a knife glinting in her hand. She placed her foot on the rooster's neck, and yanked. She cut off the head and tossed it into the fire. The body went on flapping, and when she released it, it scampered recklessly around the platform, blood spurting with every beat of its dying heart. The old woman returned to her throne, and, finally, leveled her intense gaze at Josephine.

"Girl, come here. No need to hide in the bushes like a rat. Remove your clothes and speak your troubles."

Josephine stepped warily into the firelight. She stripped off her silt-streaked dress and muddy shoes. Standing before the Sorceress, she wore only her white camisole, as was the rule. Years ago, the old woman had barely survived a knife attack by the agent of a rival priestess. Soon after she decreed that whoever sought her help must approach in their undergarments so that no weapon was concealed. Josephine ascended the stairs and knelt before the Sorceress, beside whom the headless rooster twitched and flapped its life away.

"Closer."

Josephine scooted forward until she was inches from the old woman's face. Her cheeks were marked with grotesque scars, her breath foul.

"Does your man belong to you?"

"No," said Josephine.

"Then someone has discovered us. Has he another woman? Is he impotent with you?"

"No."

“Perfume. Sprinkle some of your perfume on the *gris-gris*.”

“Sorceress, yesterday I made the *gris-gris* stronger.”

The old woman looked at her in surprise. “What have you done, child? Tell me.”

“The charm is marked with his seed. It lies under his dying wife’s mattress.”

For this, Josephine was brutally slapped.

“Stupid girl, that *gris-gris* was a love spell. Now you’ve made it a dagger. And why did you not say the man was married? Oh, the *loa* are angry and will require a sacrifice.”

Still on her knees, Josephine rubbed the sting from her cheek. She set her lips tightly together and said, “His wife must die. He cannot love me otherwise.”

The old woman held up a gnarled finger. “If she’s not dead, then he has found the charm and removed it. He knows!”

“He knows nothing.”

The Sorceress stood and stretched out her arms, bracelets jangling. “Walk the land for a thousand miles. O, devil-o, you are a swamp thing. Black ghost. Whore of Dambalah. You will walk and walk, the dead among the living. You will walk and have no peace. Not until your death is avenged.” Then she cocked her fist.

Josephine jumped down from the platform, gathered her clothes, and ran, tripping over the roots of cypress trees. She looked back once, relieved that no one followed.

TALLANT WAS PLAYING A MINUET IN THE PARLOR. THE GOOD DOCTOR’S EYES hurt from lack of sleep. He fought against the numbness in his heart. He wanted to feel pain, but there was nothing. Fine, then. He resolved to leave grief behind and not know it anymore. It was replaced by an entirely different sensation—cold curiosity. Curiosity as to whether he would come out of this epidemic alive to see sunlight fall across a young woman’s face as she walked among the squirrels in Congo Square. He struggled to raise himself and swung his legs to the side of the bed. He glanced at the mirror. A picture of absolute wretchedness. He left the guest room and entered the kitchen. He drank several cups of strong coffee. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his trouser legs were thrust into the tops of his boots. He saw Tallant standing awkwardly by the piano. The Good Doctor took his coat from the rack and slipped it on. “I’m ready,” he said.

Tallant cleared his throat. “Josephine is gone. Her obedience is questionable, I think.”

The Good Doctor looked away, then back at Tallant. He shrugged. “It’s just as well.”

Together they went upstairs, where Celeste’s body lay peacefully in bed.

“Let’s wrap her in the sheets,” Tallant suggested.

They pulled the sheets from the bed. The Good Doctor heard something hit the floor.

“What is that?” said Tallant.

The Good Doctor stooped to pick it up and answered, "*Gris-gris.*"

"Well, what's it doing here?"

"That little whore."

SHE RAN UNTIL SHE WAS EXHAUSTED, FAMISHED. THEN SHE WALKED. ON THE banks of the river an old man gave her chunks of salted fish. She continued eastward until she reached the port, at which point she left the riverside and meandered back up through Esplanade. There were noises everywhere. The tolling of bells. The slow clumping of hooves. The rattling of wheels on cobblestones. The moans of the dying. She saw two men cramming a woman's corpse into an undersized coffin. The men jammed the lid shut, mangling her lifeless face and crushing her skull so that the flies swirled in agitation.

It was midnight when she reached the house. On the porch was a filthy gray dog, which raised its head to growl at her. From the front yard she seized a fallen tree limb, keeping it between her and the dog. She paused at the door, afraid to enter because of her disheveled appearance. She was thirsty. She would do anything now for a glass of water. She stood at the door of the house, her ear pressed close to it. Silence.

"Hello?" she called out. There was no answer.

She walked through the house and into the courtyard, where she removed her soiled clothes and took a bath. Inside her quarters, she put on her sleeping gown and got in bed. A few minutes later, her door creaked open. "Is that you?" she murmured sleepily. The breathing she heard was unfamiliar. Her heart beat frantically. A ringing filled her ears. She lay completely still with her face in the pillow. She could not turn to look at the stranger looming above her.

Tallant threw the blankets to the floor. He took hold of her gown by the neck and yanked it. She heard it tear, and she was naked, scrambling to the other side of the bed. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to him and used rope to tie her wrists to the bedpost. "No," she said, but his grip was unbreakable. In a panic she tried to bolt, but he punched her until she tasted her own blood. He was behind her now, pulling her hips toward him so that she was on her knees. He took her long black hair in his fist. He pressed the pillow to her face, muffling her screams. When he was through, he flipped her over.

She felt the knife cutting into her.

IN THE FOURTH DISTRICT CEMETERY, THE FIRES WERE ALWAYS BURNING. AS THE cart drew closer, Tallant dropped the reins for a moment so he could pull on his gloves. He took the flask from his coat. Then he lit a cigarette and picked up the reins. He had been going to the cemetery every day for the last six weeks, and it had always made him happy. Tonight, things were different. He saw that the slaves were being directed by Dr. Matheson, an elderly physician with a penchant for clubbing negroes with the butt of his rifle. Dr. Matheson was waving his rifle now, signaling to Tallant that the proceedings were without flaw.

Tallant brought the cart to a halt and jumped out, anxious to get the task

over with quickly. He threw the catch and jerked down the rear gate. He pulled out one of the sheet-wrapped bodies and dragged it to the edge of the shallow pit. There he stood it on its feet and shoved. The body rolled down the incline until it settled on the pile of lime-dusted corpses. Drawing harsh breaths, he hurried back to the cart. He didn't mind the sight of so many dead things. Rather, it was the terrible smell that constricted his lungs. A rank odor hung above the cemetery—*mephitisme*, the French called it, the smell of death. It was believed to cause milk to curdle and wine to turn to vinegar. Now he dragged the second body to the edge and pushed it over. After emptying a sack of lime over the pile, he went back to the cart again and closed the gate. Then he walked to the edge of the cemetery, drawn by nothing more than the chaotic flames of a tar barrel. He lit a cigarette, suffused with the satisfaction of his crimes.

A slave by the name of Robert approached, leg shackles clanking.

"Mr. Tallant, sir!"

"Yes, Robert, what is it?"

"One of those dead bodies you brung. Body ain't dead!"

"Of course it's dead. You don't suppose I'd bury a living person, do you?"

"Sir, I swear I saw it crawl off somewheres."

"How could it crawl if it was wrapped in a sheet? Goddamn it, give me back my whiskey!"

"It got loose," Robert continued, handing over the bottle. "A dead girl, I think."

"Shut up, Robert. You're drunk."

"Hard to say because of all the blood."

Tallant drew his revolver and fired it, obliterating Robert's lower jaw.

As the mortally wounded slave writhed in the dirt, the other slaves stopped their digging and stared at Tallant. The cemetery was silent. Then he watched as his murderous behavior incited Dr. Matheson, who, whooping with delight, raised his rifle and executed another slave standing beside him with a point-blank bullet to the chest.

"Please, Dr. Matheson," Tallant said calmly, putting his own gun away. "There's much work to be done."

SHE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, THE LIGHT OF THE DISTANT STARS REMINDING her that she was lying on muddy ground. She tried to stand, but fell back down. She succeeded in getting up on her elbows. She was too weak to cry for help. Who would hear? Who would care? The whole city was crying for help. With a tremendous effort, she finally rose, staggering. Her knees trembled, her feet were like lead. Now the stars grew in intensity, rolling in the sky, and she had to look away because of the nausea the sight induced. She reeled, and each step caused her wounds to throb with pain. She wiped her mouth where the blood still flowed. She followed the sound of beating drums and chanting voices.

Hands outstretched, she felt her way through the darkness. She toppled into a ditch. She clawed at the thistles and weeds with her fingernails. She felt the clammy touch of the dead. The harsh smell of lime filled her

nostrils. It dawned on her that she had fallen into a mass grave on the bayou's edge. Desperate, she managed to pull herself out, but she couldn't find the strength to stand. She vomited something thick, something clotted, and her legs went numb. The path wavered before her like a stream in the moonlight. There was so much blood, perhaps there *was* a stream. A stream of her own blood running into the void ahead. Her blood had turned to water. She wept and prayed. But what good are prayers when the last hour has arrived? A dog approached and licked her face with its rough tongue before vanishing into the trees. She crawled on her belly, dragging her dead legs.

The drums were loud now, the singing was fierce. When she reached the clearing, black faces huddled around her.

"Who is this?" someone said.

"It's the Zombi," said another.

"No," said the Sorceress. "Her name is Josephine."

They carried her to the altar and examined her by torchlight. They washed and bandaged her wounds and lighted a white candle at her head and another at her feet. She could feel the old woman's bony hand in her own. Someone was applying dirt to her face. Someone placed a heavy instrument in her other hand—a machete? Somewhere nearby a hen was cackling.

She breathed with shallow gulps, trying hard to shut out the noises around her, the words spoken so fast and so loud until they were garbled, until they buzzed against her chest like giant insects, but it was no use. The ceremonial words triggered a thing that had been inside her all along, a monster that had known her ever since she'd come to the city to live with the Good Doctor.

It was larger than anything, larger than the darkness that had enveloped her, forever removing her from the solace of light. She would not get better, and she would never return. If she returned, it would be as something unrecognizable to her.

So she said to those gathered around her: "Conjure me."

AFTER TALLANT LEFT TO DISPOSE OF CELESTE'S CORPSE, THE GOOD DOCTOR threw away the vase of jasmine that his slave had placed on the mantel. He knew little of voodoo, but he understood that a charm like the one placed under his wife's bed was evil. It was meant to cause serious harm. His slave had betrayed him. No doubt she had worsened Celeste's condition. Perhaps the girl had even tortured his wife during her final days. Where had Josephine gone? If she returned, he would sell her. Put her back on the auction block where he had found her.

In the silence of the library, he sat with his arms hanging off the chair. He drew in a breath. A mosquito buzzed his ear. He swatted it; blood spotted his palm. If I could die now, he thought. Peacefully, gently, without a tremor or a crying out. If I could be with her. If I could believe I would be with her. His fingers tightened slowly and his head sank forward on his chest. He sprang suddenly forward and grabbed the gun, putting it into his mouth. The taste was vile.

Celeste. Take me where you are.

He stared at the portrait of his mother, a beautiful Spaniard whose long red hair flowed down over her milk-white bosom.

He had no idea how long he'd been there. After a while, though, his deepest sorrow had faltered. The most penetrating despair of his life had lost its edge. The flagellant's curse, he thought, to grow accustomed to the whip.

He straightened up and stood. Still alive. His heart pumped senselessly, his blood churned without purpose. Bones and muscles and tissue—all functioning, but for what reason? He looked at the gun on his desk. He picked it up again, put it back down. Then he turned away with a sigh and left, closing the door behind him quietly. He was on his way to the Charity Hospital, where he would do his best to placate the dying. He would do his job and hope to find some meaning in it.

ON HIS WAY HOME, TALLANT SMASHED THE BOTTLE AGAINST THE WHEEL OF AN incinerated carriage. New Orleans smelled of death and useless remedies and, above all else, naked fear. For the first time since the epidemic began, Tallant felt at one with the city. He remembered the night, years ago, when the sky was lighted by the fires of a slave revolt. An angry crowd had ignited ten thousand bales of cotton on the levee. Ships were cut from their moorings and sent floating down the river in flames. Warehouses were raided, and molasses and sugar were poured onto the burning cotton. A night of complete terror. It was the same kind of pleasure he felt now, an exhilaration in the promise of further unrest and suffering. Only now the gutters ran with blood and decomposing animals. Indeed, he felt at peace in a doomed world.

At his front door, he stomped the crud from his boots before taking them off. Inside, the house was quiet, and, socks on his feet, he padded upstairs. Miles away in the bayou, the Sorceress and her followers continued to practice their heathen religion. Tallant heard the drums going; the ceremony was reaching its climax. Raising the dead. Sacrificing the goat. Fondling the snake called Zombi. Tallant laughed and shook his head and took a light from the kitchen. He proceeded into his darkened bedroom.

The lantern seemed to dim; was the kerosene low? He fumbled in his pockets for a match, but there were none. He would have to go back downstairs to get more kerosene and some matches. He stumbled in an effort to locate the bedside lamp. Beneath the sound of the drums, he heard a floorboard creak. He stood stock-still for a moment, then swung his fading lantern left then right. The sound of something sharp whistled through the air. He felt the blade catch him in the neck. ✱

Kundela

Catherine MacLeod

THOMAS RUNS, SICK WITH HUNGER, FEVERED
with worry, beyond exhaustion.

Sleep terrifies him. The ritual killers will be closer when he wakes. He'll dream of the kundela. And falling asleep at the wrong time got him into this mess.

Jane's husband means business. Thomas went out the bedroom window in a mad scramble and looked back, expecting to see a gun pointed at him. That would have been kind compared to sending the bone pointers.

In his dreams he sees the killing-bone, the kundela. It is six inches long, smoothly pointed, adorned with hair. He knows the hair is Jane's. He knows the bone is human.

He knows the curse has never failed: he'll die if they point it at him. So he runs.

They can't kill him if they can't find him. ❁

The Red Bird

Douglas Smith

ASAI FIRST SAW THE RED BIRD THE NIGHT THE soldiers burnt his village. Fleeing in terror through rain and flames and killing, his parents dead in the mud behind him, the boy heard his name called above the screams of the dying. Called from on high.

He looked up. Aflame against the black sky, a hawk of burning plumage hovered over the forest entrance. A voice cried in his mind. *Asai! To me, to me, Asai!*

Asai ran toward the trees. A mounted rider, gleaming katana raised, burst from a smoking house to block his path. A ruby light flashed from the hawk, striking the sword and swordsman. Exploding into flames, the soldier fell screaming to the ground. Oblivious, the man's horse bent a leg for the child to mount.

Ride, Asai! Fly with me! the hawk called.

Once in the saddle, the boy clung with bleeding fingers as the horse thundered through the streets past soldiers and the dead. At the forest edge, Asai dared a last look back. The village priest stood before the burning shrine. A rider bore down on him, spear lowered. Hands crossed on his chest, the priest closed his eyes. The look of peace on his face burnt into Asai's memory. The boy turned away, blinded by tears.

They rode on through black woods lit only by the hawk's bloody glow. Trees surrendered to scrub grass then to sand and crashing surf. Just as Asai felt he would fall from the saddle, the horse stopped before the Temple of the Hidden Light.

At the base of steps rising into the darkness of the sea-cliff waited the Warrior of the Red Bird. His gaze from beneath his visor was both warm

and chill. His armor began to glow with a ruby light from above. A flutter of wings came and the Red Bird settled with the grace of beasts onto his shoulder.

The Warrior spoke to the hawk. "Is this the one, Master?"

Yes, Ikada.

The Warrior lifted the child from the horse as easily as a bird carrying a leaf and bore him into the Temple. Servants tended his wounds then bathed and fed him. That night, alone on silken sheets and feathered bed, Asai dreamt of the Red Bird and the look on the face of the priest.

THE NEXT DAY, IKADA, WARRIOR OF THE RED BIRD, DEFENDER OF THE Temple of the Hidden Light, began to teach Asai the *bushido*, the Way of the Warrior, and of the Hundred Deaths.

Each day, as the sun first set fire to the cliffs above the white Temple walls, the man and boy would rise and enter the Chamber of the Silver Blade. There, sitting on cushions of carmine silk on a floor whose mosaic tiles told of generations of Warriors, Ikada taught Asai. In those first mornings, Asai had many questions.

"Who is the Red Bird?"

Ikada looked around before answering. "The scarlet hawk is the spirit of this place. It is He that we serve."

"What is this place?"

"The Temple of the Hidden Light." Ikada spoke the words as if they might frighten something away.

"What is the Hidden Light?"

Ikada looked away. "That which we defend."

"But what is it?" the boy persisted.

Ikada turned back. Asai first saw the sadness that he would come to realize lived in Ikada always. "I do not know," he said.

WHEN THE SUN WAS HIGH, THEY SPARRED ON THE THOUSAND STEPS, WHERE each stone riser but the two topmost bore a Warrior's name.

"Are there other warriors of the Red Bird?" Asai asked, avoiding a foot sweep as he had learned just that morning.

Ikada paused a step below Asai, leaning on his sword. His long braids danced as he shook his head. "The Red One's warriors have been many, but at any time only one wears the name."

"How many have there been?"

"You, Asai, will be the thousandth defender of the Temple." Ikada looked at Asai, a sad light in his eyes. "And the last."

"Why must there be a last?"

With a solemn expression, Ikada leaned very close to Asai. "We've run out of steps," he whispered.

Asai stared back dumbly until Ikada threw back his head, roaring with laughter. "A small joke on my small hawk," he said when he could control his merriment. The tears streamed from his eyes, but Asai could still see the sadness.

"But why?" the boy asked again.

Ikada shook his head. "One day, but not yet."

AS THE SUN KISSED THE SEA AT DUSK, THEY SPARRED ON THE SAND, WEAVING their *kumite* among rusted weapons and bleached bones.

"Who were these men?" Asai asked as he moved back from an attack, stepping over a gleaming rib cage poking from the sand.

"Soldiers of war lords who thought to plunder the Temple." Ikada lifted a skull, a tarnished circlet still on its brow. "And some war lords themselves. Eh, Kiyomori?" He grinned. "You came to kill Ikada, didn't you, Shogun? Well, many have come." He dropped the skull. "And many have died."

"Why do you serve the Temple?" Asai asked.

Ikada blinked. "Why, because I was chosen. There is but one chosen in each generation. The honor is great."

"How are the Warriors chosen? How were you chosen?"

Ikada smiled down at the boy, the wind off the sea whipping his braids behind him. "As you were. By the Red Bird."

"But why was *I* chosen?" Asai now had a home and Ikada was like a father, yet Asai felt a fear he could not explain.

Ikada again shook his head. "Only the Red Bird knows."

Somehow, the answer disturbed Asai more than the question.

ASAI LOOKED FORWARD TO THE EVENINGS, WHEN HE PUT ASIDE MARTIAL ARTS for other studies. The temple library was a huge domed room tiled in blue ceramics. Towering wooden racks jammed with parchment scrolls lined the walls. Asai would sit at a low table while Ikada read or taught from diagrams and maps.

Once Asai learned to read, he devoured every text he could find. He spent every spare hour in the library and had servants bring scrolls to his room to read before sleeping.

Ikada worried at this. "Asai, you have fought hard today and studied long. Take time to relax, to dream."

Asai smiled. "For me, to read is to relax, and these," he said, sweeping his arm past the scrolls, "these feed my dreams."

NOT ALL DAYS WERE SO. ON SOME, THE TEMPLE BELL THUNDERED ITS CALL through the halls and down the steps. Then Ikada stopped whatever he was doing and called, "Asai! The Blade!"

Asai would run to the Chamber of the Silver Blade to take down the weapon from the wall. Made by a sword master to the first Shogun Yoritomo, its steel was folded a hundred times, polished to a silvery sheen. When Asai returned, Ikada would be dressed in his battle armor, a red sash around his waist.

Ikada would sheathe the blade on his back and stride to the crest of the Thousand Steps to survey the sand below. Most days brought but a solitary challenger or a small band.

On this day, Asai stood beside Ikada, staring down at rank after rank of soldiers arrayed on the beach. Asai had never seen so many people. Ikada grinned. "Shugon Antoku seeks to impress us." He descended the steps, humming a tune, Asai at his side.

"What is happening, Sensei?" the child asked. Shugons were local warlords, servants to the Shogun.

"Antoku seeks entrance but the Red Bird finds him unworthy. This Shugon is famed for his cruelty. I will fight his champion, Harata, the tall one in front—a great swordsman."

"What of the army? Why does Antoku not just attack?"

Ikada just smiled and looked up to where the Red Bird circled the beach. No other answer came and Asai fell silent. They reached the bottom step and Ikada walked out to meet Harata.

The two warriors bowed and stepped back, drawing their blades. Harata lunged. Holding his stance, Ikada raised the Silver Blade, handle high and point angled low, as Harata's sword stabbed at his throat. Harata's blade slid off Ikada's, missing its mark. Ikada thrust, and the Silver Blade's point pierced Harata's chest armor. Before the man's body hit the sand, Ikada had turned to walk back to the steps, his sword sheathed again.

A gasp escaped the ranks of men. Mounted on a gray mare, Shugon Antoku raised his sword, screaming "Attack!" Twenty cavalry broke from the larger body. Asai cried a warning but Ikada just smiled and kept walking. As the riders neared Ikada, the beach erupted in fire and Asai choked on smoke and heated air. When his dazzled eyes could see again, Asai gazed out on the charred bodies of twenty men and horses. Overhead, the Red Bird circled, its outline still glowing against the sky.

"Only one may challenge," Ikada said, as they climbed back.

"What if another wishes to fight you now?"

Ikada looked hurt. "Asai! Even Ikada needs his rest. One challenge a day is all the Red Bird allows."

THEY WERE NOT ALONE IN THE TEMPLE. IKADA GRANTED ACCESS TO THE library to visiting Jodo Shin priests. In return, the holy men gave the dharma or recited sutras for the dead. The Temple also housed servants who tended to chores and the two warriors' needs. As Asai grew, he became aware of a new need of his own.

The Temple servants included the Warrior's concubines. Although his father had told Asai of the ways of the flesh, knowing of it was far removed from feeling it. Ikada was not blind to the change. On the night Asai turned fourteen, Ikada sent his favorite concubine to the boy's bedchamber.

Neither spoke of it the next morning, but a smirk played on Ikada's face throughout the day. After that, Asai took a woman most nights, sometimes just to avoid being alone. Other nights he did not, just to be alone. The boy was tender and gentle, much loved by many of the women, but he never chose a favorite. Nor did he talk with them of much beyond his studies and Temple life. He knew this bothered Ikada, but the Warrior said nothing.

So through all the days of all the years, Ikada would teach, and Asai would learn. The orphan learnt well. Asai turned eighteen as Master of the Hundred Deaths, save one.

ONE DAY AS THEY SPARRED ON THE SAND, IKADA STEPPED BACK, CALLING "Yamat!" sharply. Asai lowered his sword, glad for a break. The sky swirled in gray humor and a wind off the waves stung his eyes. Ikada stared past him up the Thousand Steps.

Above the cliffs, brilliant against the bleak sky, circled the Red Bird. Asai felt a strange dread as the hawk spiraled lower. A ruby beam burst from the bird to dance on the top steps for two breaths. Rising, the Red Bird vanished into the clouds.

Asai turned to speak, but Ikada's face choked off the words in Asai's throat. Ikada walked past him, never taking his eyes from the summit. Reaching the steps, he climbed with the gait of a man going to his own execution. Asai followed in silence.

Near the summit, Ikada stopped. Asai came to stand beside him, staring at the next to last step of the Thousand. The name Ikada was burnt now in Kana symbols into the stone.

"Sensei," Asai began, but Ikada raised his hand. Turning his back on the step, Ikada gazed at the sand below. Asai looked down too. A sole rider sped along the surf's edge, black armor, weapons and saddlery, a dragon's tail of sand in his wake. Ikada watched for a breath then began his descent. Asai followed, unable to speak of the fear in his breast.

At the bottom, Ikada drew the Silver Blade from the sheath on his back. He raised it to his lips then laid it on the bottom step. "Asai, give me your sword," he said quietly.

Asai glanced at the Silver Blade but said nothing. He handed Ikada his katana, a true but unremarkable weapon.

Ikada sheathed it. The black samurai now stood waiting. Ikada's voice was soft. "Asai, today the Red Bird will know how well Ikada has taught you." Grasping Asai's shoulders in both hands, he smiled. "You have been a fine student and a better friend. I love you as I would my own son. Good-bye, Asai."

Without another word, Ikada strode across the sand to his challenger. Both bowed and in an eye blink drew their blades and stepped back into fighting stance, swords vertical in a two-handed grip. The samurai moved in at once, feinting a head cut but shifting to slash across the ribs. Parrying, Ikada slid his blade along the other's, nicking the samurai's neck. The man retreated, but Ikada closed again, pressing his attack.

Many times, Ikada came within a hair's breadth of ending the battle but could not deliver a death cut. Bleeding from a dozen places, the black samurai now fought with his blade in his left hand, right arm hanging limp at his side.

Then Ikada, blocked on a vicious downward cut, dropped into a crouch to execute a perfect reverse spin. His blade slashed under the man's guard, slicing a thigh. Grunting, the samurai fell to a knee. Ikada closed, sword raised for the final blow.

And slipped—on something in the sand. Something round and white. His blade swung wide from its *kamai* position. Still kneeling, the black samurai thrust upwards. As the point entered Ikada's throat, Asai's own throat gave his scream life.

Asai ran onto the sand, Silver Blade over his head. The samurai stood and grinned, no doubt at the sight of a man-child warrior. The two engaged and the grin vanished. Asai attacked with such fury that the samurai could only parry and retreat. The black warrior stumbled. Asai beat away a feeble slash and the man's sword flew from him.

"I beg mercy!" the samurai cried, on his knees before Asai.

"Beg to the demons!" Asai spat. His sword sang across the neck of his foe. The helmeted head spun lazily in the air, drops of blood shining in the evening sun, to land in the sand.

Asai stared at the Silver Blade in his hand, unable to remember picking it up. He stumbled to Ikada, feeling for a pulse that he knew he would not find. Tears streaking his face, he picked up the object that had tripped the Warrior. A skull, a circlet of metal still attached, grinned back at him.

From above came the beat of wings. The Red Bird settled on Ikada's chest. Lowering its head into the liquid pooling at the wound, it then touched its dripping beak to its feathers, repeating this until it glistened with blood. The hawk began to glow in the dim light. The glow died and the bird's plumage grew a deeper shade of red. The bird leapt into the air again.

"Is this how you honor one that served you?" Asai shouted at the hawk circling above, the pain inside him overcoming his fear.

Such is the final test for each of my Warriors. Asai felt the misery in those words, a black pool of infinite depth. He looked into that pool and drew back in fear from its edge. Drew back from something he was not yet ready to face.

Asai watched the Red Bird disappear into the darkening sky. He then carried Ikada up the Thousand Steps. In the Vault of Heroes, he prepared the body. He opened the next-to-last sepulcher and laid Ikada on the bier. After reading from the bushido, he closed the sepulcher, snuffing out all candles but one. He left the vault, the Silver Blade on his back.

That night, Asai lay awake thinking of things left unsaid.

THE RED BIRD CAME THE NEXT DAY AS ASAI DID KATA BEFORE THE WAVES. The sky was gray and the wind chill. The hawk landed on a skeletal hand grasping at the sky from the sand.

Ikada is dead. You are the Warrior now.

Asai felt anger again. "You could have saved him, bird."

I could not.

"Why?"

It is not the way.

Fury erupted in Asai. "What is the way? Why must we die to serve you?" He flung the Silver Blade to stick in the still-red sand where Ikada had fallen. "Why am I here, you bloody crow?"

The Red Bird was silent, and fear tempered Asai's anger. Then the hawk

spoke. *You must seek the Hidden Light. You are the last. The last hope for your people.*

“Why am I the last?”

The sands run out.

“Where is the Hidden Light?”

The bird looked at him. *It is here.*

“But what is it?”

That which you must seek.

Asai’s anger built again. “And what if I fail, crow?”

A thousand years of misery for your kind.

His fear returned. “Why?”

War dogs gather. The light dims. You must pass the test.

A thought flew to him. “Who must? I or my people?”

Something in the hawk’s gaze recalled the look Ikada would wear when Asai had mastered the next Death.

Wisdom begins. Opening its wings, the bird leapt into the face of the sea breeze. Asai watched it vanish in the clouds.

SHE CAME TO HIM ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF IKADA’S DEATH. AS THE TEMPLE bell rang, Asai descended the steps to face a small figure clad in what seemed the castoff armor of a dozen warriors. A slim hand removed an ill-fitting helmet, and he first looked on her face. “My name is Sawako,” she said.

“I do not wish to kill you,” Asai replied, staring at her.

“Then we begin well, for I do not wish to be killed.” Taking off the rest of her armor and untying a sash at her waist, she pulled her dress off over her head to stand naked before him.

Asai stood transfixed for several breaths. Then sheathing the Silver Blade, he walked to her and pulled her to him in a long kiss. After what seemed a lifetime, he broke off the kiss, scooped her into his arms and carried her up the steps into the Temple. Overhead, the Red Bird cried unheeded.

THAT NIGHT AFTER THEIR LOVEMAKING, SAWAKO TOLD HER STORY. “MY VILLAGE lies two days to the east. When news of Ikada-san’s death reached us, Antoku, the local Shugon, promised to bring the Shogun the Temple’s secret. Two moons ago, he chose a swordsman of my village to challenge the Warrior. To challenge you.”

She looked away. “The man did not return. In his wrath, Antoku sentenced each first son in the village to die. I begged that we be given another chance to do Antoku honor, that I would bring him the secret. He laughed and was going to give me to his men. Then a Jodo Shin priest told him of my birth.”

“What of your birth?”

“The priest said that on the night I was born, an omen appeared in the sky above our village.”

Asai felt a coldness grip his belly. “What was this omen?”

Sawako turned back to him, snuggling her head into his chest. “A great red hawk, whose plumage glowed as if on fire.”

THE NEXT MORNING, ASAI SHOWED SAWAKO THE TEMPLE. AS THEY WALKED, she told more of her bargain with Antoku. "I did not promise to defeat you, only to find the secret. Antoku has given me one year. If I fail, he will execute my entire village." She laid a hand on the silken arm of his robe. "Show me the Light. You need not surrender the Temple but you will save my people."

Asai looked into her eyes. "Sawako, I cannot. I defend what I do not know. No Warrior has ever discovered the Hidden Light, and I am the last." He told her of the prophecy and Sawako seemed to fall into deep thought. They walked in silence.

Later they sparred on the beach with wooden *bokken*. The village samurai had taught her well. She was quick with fine form, but he had the reach, strength, and years of daily study.

Resting on the beach after, she spoke again of the Light. "You must find it or misery will befall our land. I must learn of it or my people die." She turned to him. "Let me help you."

Asai laughed, leaning on an elbow beside her. "So a woman-child will succeed where a thousand Warriors have failed?"

Sawako shrugged slim shoulders. "I can hardly do worse."

Asai scowled. "How could you help me?"

"The priests taught me to read and write." She pulled him close and he felt her warm breath, smelled its sweetness. "And I can help you as I did last night. You are far too serious."

Asai felt his face grow hot. "What if we fail? What if a year comes and the Light remains hidden? What then?"

She stood with her *bokken*. "Then to me, you will again become the Warrior." She turned away. "And I must kill you."

SAWAKO STAYED AND THEIR LUST GREW TO LOVE. EACH MORNING, THEY SAT close together in the library, reading and discussing the great philosophers. Their hunger for the secret that remained hidden lived with them each minute.

Sometimes, Asai felt he had found a great truth and sought out the Red Bird. The hawk always knew of his need and came. Explaining what he had learned, Asai would wait for a reply.

When it came, it was always the same. *You grow wise.*

"Is this the Light?"

No.

One such morning, when Sawako had been with him for about two months, Asai stood on the cliff edge, the hawk beside him. After receiving this answer again, Asai exploded in fury. "Why do you play this game? Where is the light?"

You grow close. Closer than any other.

Asai hesitated. "You never speak of Sawako, never asked me of her. Did I do wrong? Have I violated my duty?"

You alone can judge that.

"What of her birth omen? Was that you, Red Bird?"

Spreading its wings, the hawk leapt off the cliff. Asai called after it but

the only answer was the cold wind. That night, Sawako told Asai she carried his child. The next day, he took her as his wife.

SHE NAMED THE BOY SHIROTORI. IT MEANT "WHITE BIRD." WHEN ASAI ASKED her of it, she said "This world has seen enough of red. White is the color of peace."

And the shrouds of the dead, Asai thought, but said nothing.

Asai had never known the joy he felt with his wife and child. Yet, as the year wore on and the light stayed hidden, he felt the sands of happiness slipping through his hands. On the first day of the twelfth month since Sawako had come, Asai found her dressed again in her armor, doing kata by the sea.

"Why do you do this?" he asked, his voice breaking.

"Because I must," she said. Her face was wet—with tears or sea spray, he knew not which. She turned back to her kata and he turned his back on her.

ON THE EVE OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF SAWAKO'S ARRIVAL, ASAI STOOD ON THE topmost Temple step, dripping with sweat, Silver Blade in his hand. The hawk settled onto a dragon statue beside him, glowing blood red in the night. *You train hard.*

"To kill the woman I love, the mother of my son." No reply came. Asai turned to the hawk. "Why must she die, crow? What does it serve?" No answer. "Over two hundred in her village will die with her. Why? What good is in this?" His rage built. "Is it the blood you need, death bird?" Still no answer came, and Asai could hold his fury no longer. "Then I give you blood!"

He swung the sword and the hawk sprang into the air. The bird was too fast, but the Silver Blade clipped a tail feather. As the hawk vanished into the dark sky, the feather floated to land on the top step, where it seemed to melt. Touching the sticky puddle, Asai drew his finger back. It dripped blood.

He drew a line on his forehead with the blood. "Is it not fitting that I wear this mark?" he asked the night. He slumped to the steps. "If I win, she dies and two hundred more. And with her dies my love, my reason for life. No, our son would live, but with no mother. What do I know of raising a child?" He stood to gaze at where the moon silvered the surf below. "But if I die, no other dies. Only Asai. What loss is that?"

The wind whispered his name. He smiled sadly. "Asai, just Asai. No loss in that." Turning from the sea, he entered the temple. That night he made love to Sawako for the last time.

THEY ROSE EARLY AND IN SILENCE. HE WATCHED HER DRESS THEN WALK TO where he sat on the window ledge. She kissed him long and deeply. Then picking up a scroll from her table, she left not looking back. He watched her go, her tears cool on his face.

Asai stayed at the window until he saw her descend the Steps. Then he dressed and broke fast lightly. He visited each servant, saying his good-

byes without saying so. In the nursery, he held his son for a long time, singing in a low soft voice a song that Sawako sang to Shirotori each night. He left special instructions with the servant who cared for the child.

In the Chamber of the Silver Blade, Asai knelt at the low table where Ikada had taught him the Way. On it stood a vial of green liquid. His studies had brought knowledge of herbs and potions. Sawako was a fine swordswoman, but Asai knew she was no match for a Warrior. His reactions were too instinctive to trust the outcome to his intent alone. The poison would work slowly, at first to impede his movements, finally to stop his heart if her blade had not done so. He raised the vial and drank.

HE STARED AT THE TOP STEP, STILL BLANK ABOVE IKADA'S NAME, AND CALLED to the hawk circling overhead. "Why is my name not written here, crow? You knew Ikada would die! Do you not know that I die today?" The hawk continued to circle. "So be it," Asai cried and slashed at the stone with the Silver Blade. Again and again he swung, until his name stood carved above Ikada's. With a last glance skyward, he descended the steps.

She knelt on the sand facing the sea and did not answer when he called her name. He stumbled over shifting sand, the poison burning in his muscles. He was about to call her name again when he saw the blood and the blade point protruding from her back.

His throat choked a cry that tore his heart as he ran to her. He wrenched the sword from where she had thrust it in her breast. Her face was cold as he took it in his hands. "Why?" he cried to the wind, knowing the answer even before he saw the scroll beside her, before he read the words she had written.

Dearest love, I will say do not grieve yet know you will. Know that I loved you and was sure of your love. I saw no other way. The Light stays hidden. I failed my people and cannot live while they die. I could never harm you but feared you would work your death to save me. This is my answer to the question we lived with this joyous year. Raise our son with the love you gave me. Forever, your Sawako.

His sobs became spasms as he lay her on the sand. "We die for nothing, my love," he cried. *No*, he thought, *I can still save her people*. Lifting her sword, he turned its point to his breast. "If I die by your sword, Sawako, you have won the Temple." He threw himself on her blade, falling beside her. As he lay dying, her face recalled to him the doomed priest's look of peace the night the Red Bird first came to him.

THE RED BIRD SETTLED ON THE FALLEN WARRIOR'S CHEST AND DIPPED ITS beak into the wound around the blade. Painting itself in the man's blood, it hopped then to the woman's body that lay beside him, adding her blood to its red sheen.

A glow touched its feathers then burst into brilliance as the hawk leapt into the air aflame. Fire burned away the scarlet coat, and from the center of a winged sun emerged a great eagle, with feathers of burnished gold. The eagle spread its wings.

From each wing, a feather fell to land on the two lovers. The feathers became white flames, and fire consumed the bodies. From the smoke flew two white doves who circled first each other and then the eagle as all three disappeared into the sky.

SHUGON ANTOKU AND HIS ARMY ARRIVED AT SAWAKO'S VILLAGE TO FIND IT deserted. Traveling monks told of two white doves who led a band of people eastward. When Antoku reached the Temple of the Hidden Light, Sawako's people were encamped on the sand. A shimmering wall of white light separated them and the Temple from Antoku and his men. Antoku ordered the villagers slain.

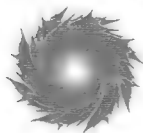
As the first soldiers touched the white wall, their bodies burst into flames and blew away, ashes on the wind. Those behind fled in terror, screaming of demons. Antoku cursed them as cowards but was left alone on the sand, his promise to the Shogun unfulfilled. He regarded the white wall for a long time, then drew and fell on his sword.

WHEN HE TURNED EIGHTEEN, SHIROTORI, SON OF ASAI, SON OF SAWAKO, began to preach the Way of the Hidden Light. Villages fell under his protection and his teaching. His followers grew and the Way spread. Armies deserted any Shogun who raised arms against him. Soon his reach extended to the Shogun's palace.

On the anniversary of his parents' deaths, Shirotori stood on the steps of that palace as the Shogun broke his sword and bent his knee to the boy.

Shirotori's rule was just and kind. The people said that truth and love rode with him always, in the form of two white doves on each shoulder. He was known by many names. The Prophet. The Truth. The Loved.

But most called him *Kashoku*, which meant...Bright Light. ♣



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The Missing Word

Allan Weiss

IT WAS A TYPICAL LATE AFTERNOON IN THE DESERT of Alakhar, and Eliezer nearly fell asleep in his saddle after a day of seeing nothing but the featureless horizon shimmering around him. There was no sign of a village, or distant oasis, or even caravan stretched along the brown sands. Even Melech seemed ready to doze as he lethargically planted his hooves on the desert. So, did every day have to be interesting? Was God an entertainer?

As it was only four days after the summer solstice, the evening came slowly. Eliezer loved the dusk, because every moment promised deeper and deeper night that revealed more and more of the five-pointed stars of this world. It was God Who made the stars shine...but who was responsible for the black spot that now suddenly appeared on the eastern horizon? The spot grew, gained definition, until he discerned a horseman leading a band of pedestrians, the entire crowd heading straight for him. He asked Melech to hold and pulled himself erect, moving only to stroke his beard. It was never a mistake to adopt an appropriately intimidating appearance for such encounters.

The horseman, he now saw, was swathed in fine white and gray robes, his head wrapped in a *kaffiyeh* that flapped in the wind. "A big shot," Eliezer suggested to Melech. Melech nodded. "Could be trouble, too," Eliezer added, and shrugged: what else could a big shot be?

"Greetings!" the gentleman called in the Gentile tongue; his little troupe held tightly together behind him as they nervously watched Eliezer—maybe afraid he'd impulsively turn them into birds or something. "I'm

sorry," the horseman continued as he halted his horse; "*shalom!*"

Eliezer maintained his silence, which never failed to impress. He appreciated the unnecessary shift in language, but knew it wouldn't last. The *goyim* never bothered to learn more than a polite word or two of the language of the Book.

After a minute the horseman tried again. "Can you understand me? I don't know your tongue very well!"

Eliezer nodded. Melech said, Speak up already, the people look scared silly. To disturb him out in the middle of the desert like this...they couldn't wait for his century-long rounds? People expected him to be certain places at certain times, to help with crops or livestock. They must be desperate, Melech suggested, stating the obvious.

Fine. He'd listen to them, and if they wanted him to perform a simple act that wouldn't throw him too much off schedule, maybe he'd help.

Using one hand to hold down the bottom of his *kaffiyeh* while clutching his reins with the other, the man said, "Are you Eliezer Ben-Avraham, the wizard we have heard so much about?" His entourage peeked around, above, and under his black steed, but looked at it as if it were some unEarthly creature.

"I am," Eliezer said at last. "And who is asking?"

"I am Kala-Wek, of the rockcity of Al-ayar. We need your services. Can you follow us?"

Melech refused to offer an opinion. This is a helper? "What is the nature of the task you wish me to perform?"

"It's hard to explain—"

"Transformation? Something with your herds? You have crops?" In this desert? Not likely. "A good harvest I can try, but I'm not as young as I used to be." That was true; it was also irrelevant; but it often excused him from interfering too much with the will of God.

"Please, come with us. The priests will explain."

Melech shook his head in distaste. He hated mysteries, surprises; he was so cautious...if he had his way they would do nothing interesting at all. "I'm sorry," Eliezer said, "but if you can't explain your problem maybe it's not so serious."

"It's very serious, Wizard."

"Give me an idea at least."

Most of Kala-Wek's face was hidden by the headdress, but the strain was apparent. "A word is missing," he said at last.

As soon as he said that, the people raised their right hands, and made a bizarre sign across their foreheads—something from the Sun-Maker religion, no doubt. Maybe his ancient brain had misinterpreted. But Melech must have heard the same thing; his ears twitched, and his eyes blinked rapidly—not, it seemed, from the effects of blowing sand. Sunstroke, Melech joked, then asked, What else can we do but follow them? He was right, of course; Eliezer would hate himself forever if he didn't find out what this was all about.

"Please come," Kala-Wek begged (a shame to see a man acting so), as he gestured with his free hand. The reins in the other slapped against the

horse's back; Melech said how much he pitied a mount burdened with an incompetent rider. The man was no youngster; in all his years had he never ridden a horse before?

Eliezer spread his hands in surrender. His curse required him to help anyone in need, and his curiosity wouldn't let him pass up this opportunity. "Okay, okay. But if this takes long, others who are expecting my services may suffer." Always a good idea to add a little guilt.

"We understand," replied the gentleman, clearly relieved. "Thank you, sir."

The rider turned in a wide circle, his horse straining to obey almost contradictory commands of hands and legs, and the people walked beside, glancing back at Eliezer and Melech. Eliezer followed from a safe distance.

They led him into a strange part of the desert, one he'd believed uninhabited, and climbed up the ridge of a crater. Melech stepped carefully through the pass the people crossed, and onto the downslope of the crater. In the crater's bowl was nothing but a small central outcrop of rock. Melech shot a look at Eliezer that said, "Whatever happens, this was your idea." So!

The central protrusion proved to be larger than he'd thought, and holes dotted its surface. Heads protruded from the holes, watching his arrival. What, had they never seen a stranger before? And then Melech raised his left front hoof in derision (a very annoying gesture!) and said, I can't believe it took you this long to figure it out. Of course! A race of cave-dwelling hermits! Kala-Wek dismounted and led the way into a small opening at the base of the little mountain. Eliezer found himself in a well-lit warren of tunnels. A nation of bat-people, Melech sneered (sometimes he was such a bigot). "Be fair, my friend," Eliezer said aloud; "God makes all kinds. Is it so much better to have no home at all?" Melech answered in a half-serious affirmative as Eliezer dismounted, his ankles and knees communicating their unhappiness with their renewed burden.

Two men led the horses away, and Eliezer told Melech to keep him informed of his condition. "We've heard tales about you, Great Wizard," Kala-Wek began as he removed the headdress, "and we know your powers." Despite being a desert-dweller he had pale skin; his long, curly hair and thick beard were gray—not the gray of age, but of the stone around him, as if he were not merely a resident of the mountain but part of it. "Our problem is serious, Wizard, and only one such as you can help us."

"Your confidence in me is very flattering, but I just perform my deeds with God's power and indulgence." And because he had no choice.

"Come." Kala-Wek led him through a series of tunnels illuminated by smokeless torches, upstairs and down (Eliezer felt it in his legs), until they reached an arched doorway covered by a curtain of thin, opaque material, hanging from rings set into the very stone of the arch itself. Kala-Wek pushed the curtain aside, revealing a high-ceilinged room, its walls gleaming with polished stone tiles and lines of tiny jewels curling in elaborate designs. Kala-Wek motioned him to enter, and Eliezer did so, blinking as

the jewels flashed in the light from the round windows above his head.

Four men in fancy robes and tall, bulbous hats glimmering with yet more jewels knelt on low benches before an even lower table, on which lay a huge black tome. The priests focused entirely on the book, not deigning even to look at Eliezer. This was why he came so far out of his way, to be shown no hospitality? On the wall behind them, high over their bent heads, was a sun of beaten gold; seven pointed beams radiated from it, each ending in a blood-colored ruby. Such wealth! But if you lived in a mountain you should expect to find a few nice stones lying around... Eliezer waited before the priests. *Nu?*

Without looking up from the book the priest on the far left said, "If you wish, you may sit on the floor, Heathen."

Heathen! God should only—! "I'll stand, thank you."

"As you wish. It is difficult to speak about these matters with barbarians and unbelievers."

With WHAT? "Then I won't dirty your temple!" Eliezer turned to leave, but the second priest called him back.

"Please, Wizard!"

Eliezer stood before them again. "Unfortunately, it's my God-given duty to use my powers to help His Adamic brood, no matter how far from His path they stray." Unbeliever! Barbarian! Through gritted teeth he said, "Tell me what you need me to do."

The first priest spoke again, but never raised his eyes from the book. "You see before you the Ma'arim, our Holy Text. Each day we read from the Great Beacon's word, and praise His Name."

The four priests, in unison, bowed forward and mumbled something like, "Blessed be His Name."

"But three manifestations ago," the first continued, "we looked within and saw that a word was missing."

Again the same story? Eliezer waited for more explanation, but none came. "A word is missing," he repeated, trying to sound interested, not incredulous.

"Yes," the second priest said. "There was a horrifying space where a word would be. It was gone."

"My friends, you'll excuse me, but a word can't just get up and walk away."

"We think it did."

Oy! Crazy, the lot of them. When Eliezer had played with fire, and violated the Code by delving into those off-limit secrets, he had agreed to wander the world for all time, and use the powers he'd gained to assist any who needed them. He'd thought it a good bargain at the time, given the alternative. But this! Okay, so he'd learned a few things! So he'd maybe stuck his nose where it didn't belong! But did that mean he'd have to deal with *meshuggeneh goyim*?

"My friends, I've heard many stories in my travels, but yours...well, so how can I be of assistance?"

"It is obvious, Wizard," the first priest said, as if Eliezer were stupid not to see. "Please find it."

“Of course.” He struck a thoughtful pose, but really he was calling to Melech, who replied that everything was fine, he’d been led to a stone-walled stall full of feed and water, so not to worry. You heard? Eliezer asked him, and Melech replied, Yes, I did, and I’m sorry I didn’t insist we run from them. Eliezer changed his posture to suggest to his audience (as if they were looking!) that he’d come up with an important point. “It would help, naturally, if you would tell me what the word is.”

“We can’t.”

Eliezer let that sink in. “I see.” But then, what did it matter? You find a word running around the desert, it has to be the right one—how many could there be? “Can you give me the context? It might help me know where—”

“No heathen may know the Holy Text.”

Eliezer sighed. “God granted me many powers as I studied His Word. But He did not make me like Himself; I cannot do the impossible. I’m sorry.” He once more turned to go.

“Wizard,” the second priest said, “without a pristine Text, our world is doomed. Without our Words, we are nothing.”

Eliezer considered a moment. That was understandable, certainly—especially to one whose religion was based on the Book, the Word. And these people were desperate, or they’d never have dared leave their rockcity, en masse, to wander the desert looking for him. Help them he couldn’t, that was plain; to *try* to help them would be a *mitzvah*. “At least tell me how to start. Give me some idea.”

Priest Number One raised his left hand. “The Great Beacon will guide you.”

“Thank you.” Eliezer gave the bowed heads a look he was glad they couldn’t see. “My fee, as you probably know, is shelter and nourishment, as much as I want.”

“We know. A meal is being prepared by one of our women—may we never be cursed as they.”

Eliezer wasn’t so sure he agreed with that sentiment, but only said, “Goodbye,” and walked out through the doorway. Kala-Wek awaited him in the corridor, smiling questioningly. Eliezer nodded and shrugged that he would help if he could, and Kala-Wek burst out with a cry of joy.

“Bless you, Eliezer Ben-Avraham!” he cried, clapping his hands twice. “My people have prepared a fine welcome for you.”

“Are you in charge here?” Eliezer asked. They wound through the mountain interior, passing many doorways veiled with curtains ranging from plain to very fancy. That made sense; how else to show off your wealth and status in a cave?

“I am the Prince.” Kala-Wek didn’t stop for bows, as most sheiks and kings would have.

The walls around them shone, not with dampness but with skillful polishing. Which got him wondering what these people did about water. His question was answered when he saw pipes curving up the walls of the tunnel. “Quite a city you have here,” Eliezer remarked.

“Yes. We have lived here for uncounted centuries.”

They came to a huge doorway covered by a curtain embroidered with scenes of merriment: people eating, drinking wine, laughing like fools. The curtain was parted by two very shy girls who glanced up at Eliezer briefly then lowered their eyes. Inside, a long table reached almost from one end of the room to the other, topped with all manner of foods: meats, poultry, dates, you name it. Two full silver wine goblets stood opposite each other.

"We will dine and talk," Kala-Wek said. "Then you will rest, and begin your search tomorrow."

"It's a bargain," Eliezer said, eyes magnetically drawn to the abundant dinner before him. A wonderful sight; so he'd put up with a little craziness!

"WHERE, MAY I ASK, DID YOU GET SUCH DELICACIES?" HE ASKED KALA-WEK, as they sat eating the last of the dates.

"We have special chambers where we grow our food, and sometimes we trade." Kala-Wek ordered his maidservants about with hand gestures, seldom needing to say anything beyond "You!"

Trade? An isolated place like this? Eliezer stroked his beard. "With whom, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"With wandering people like yourself."

"And what do you offer in return, that would draw people to your stony market?"

Kala-Wek laughed. "Look around you." Of course: the jewels were useful for more than just decoration.

"Are you not afraid of thieves?"

"No," Kala-Wek said dismissively, but didn't elaborate.

"Yet for all your wealth, you still grieve the loss of a few letters, eh?"

Kala-Wek sat back on his ottoman, clutching the table to keep himself from falling altogether. A precarious position. "You speak truly, Wizard," he said somberly.

"Does anyone know how such a thing could have happened?"

"Is it not obvious, Wizard? You of all people should understand. It is a *word*."

Light flooded Eliezer's stupid old brain. And he a "master" of the *Kabbalah*! So it wasn't only his circulation that was slowing down! He lifted his goblet and downed a little wine, to cover his embarrassment. "You shame me, Kala-Wek," he said at last. "A great Wizard I thought I was, but no man should forget his roots."

Kala-Wek looked at him with a puzzled expression—and maybe a little disappointment? "Of course. The power of the letters, the sound... why do you think we sought out a student of the *Kabbalah*, for is that not a system based on the magic of words, the ultimate guide to logomancy?"

"So it is." He called to Melech, who heard and (let it be admitted as justifiable) laughed. In self-punishment he refused to touch the small orange cake placed before him by a silver-robed maiden. "Forgive an old man."

Kala-Wek simply shrugged, granting absolution for whatever sin Eliezer might feel guilty of. "Who else but a *Kabbalist* would understand the power

of language and know how to recapture and restrain a word?"

"A word has powers, true," Eliezer said; "indeed, words are the basis for *all* magic, not just that of *Kabbalah*, but I have to admit I've never heard of one...becoming mobile."

"I think that when a word is believed in as our words are, it must gain even more power. Under the Beacon's glow, who knows what such a word might become able to do?"

"Of course you are right, Your Highness," Eliezer said.

As Kala-Wek was served more wine, Eliezer asked Melech how he fared. Melech replied he was very comfortable, and in fact enjoyed sole residency in the stable. Does it not strike you as odd, he continued, that these people have a stable, although they have no need of a horse, since they never travel beyond this mountain?

Eliezer considered for a moment. Our host has a horse, he reminded Melech.

Then where is it?

Melech's question hung there between them, in the mental silence, as Eliezer sucked the last morsels of fruit from the pit. In another stable? In another part of the mountain. How was he supposed to know? Why should he care?

Because this stable is brand-new.

You're sure?

Eliezer felt waves of exasperation coming from the horse's head, or heart (whichever it might be)—as if he couldn't tell!

"Wizard, are you well?"

Oy! Another sudden burst of recognition.

The Prince seemed to see something in his eyes. "You have questions," he said.

"You have magic."

The Prince froze briefly, then swallowed what was in his mouth. "Of course. Not in your league, but, yes, we do."

"Why do you need me, then?"

"For your specialized skills."

"You can create living things, am I right?" Eliezer recalled the taste of the many foods he'd eaten: bread, meat, fruit. Delicious—but not natural. "The prerogative of God."

"Do you not exercise control over the forces of nature?"

As if there was no difference! "Over all but life itself. Some things only the Lord can or should do."

Kala-Wek said nothing for a while, as his servants poured coffee into a tiny red cup and helped him wipe his royal mouth. Such powers were the kind only granted by the Black Demons (God forbid!) for evil purposes. At last the Prince stretched his legs, adopting a more relaxed pose as he rested a forearm on a raised knee and waved the rest of the food away. Eliezer was able to grab another clump of bread before it disappeared. Maybe "disappeared" was just the right word.

"Wizard," the Prince began, "our powers were great—great enough to let us live in a desert, with only our underground sea and ingenuity to keep

us alive. And this mountain," he said, looking around as if able to see it all, "is uninviting to the Bedou who roam the sands looking for new homes. But it is our home; we *are* our home; we are here, alive and prosperous, thanks to the bounty of the true God, his gift of water, and our faith."

So. "And your faith gives the words strength."

"Until now, yes." Kala-Wek spread his hands. "What happens, then, if the words gain a life of their own, if our Holy Text flits away, word by word?" He motioned toward the walls, the tapestries, the jewels. "No more. We ourselves would become Bedou." He said that with a shudder, and Eliezer nodded. To become nothing more than a wanderer, dependent on the hospitality of others, or God's blessings on an unknown land! A life to be wished on no one...

"It would truly be a regrettable fate for a God-fearing people," Eliezer observed—generously, for these were *goyim*. "And your own priests—"

"—are useless without what you can return to us. Even now, our power wanes, and we do not know how much longer we can continue to feed ourselves. Let alone you."

A chill coursed up his neck. Eliezer was obliged to stay until he'd helped them, but their power to keep flesh on his bones was fading. Would he end up starving with all the rest? Should he fail, what then? If only he hadn't pried into God's forbidden secrets, and drawn upon his head this awful curse!

"So, where do I begin?"

"I cannot tell you, Wizard."

It was utterly exasperating. "You won't tell me what word it is I'm to look for, nor its context." Kala-Wek shook his head. "So! I'll see what I can do, then."

But no ideas came, even as the maidservants led him to a small bedchamber. He had undeservingly been given a smooth stone bed topped with a straw-stuffed mattress, and a pillow filled with the finest sand for his thick head. Before sleeping he tried calling Melech again, but at the sound of his mind's voice the horse merely began laughing again, and Eliezer shut him out.

THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER AN EQUALLY SUMPTUOUS BREAKFAST OF MAGICALLY produced foods, he mounted Melech once more just outside the rockcity. Melech looked fine, but was not talkative.

Kala-Wek stood in the entranceway, surrounded by a crowd of his people, who cowered in the darkness like moles; others looked on from their windows. "Good luck, Wizard," he said, beaming up at Eliezer as the sun beamed down. "Only you can save us all!"

All! Eliezer included. "Is there nothing you can tell me?"

"Only that we pray God may shine on your quest."

"Thank you." A heart-warming sentiment. "Don't worry. It couldn't have gotten far—" he automatically added. How quickly *did* a word travel? He was supposed to offer the client encouraging words, but... "It's in God's hands, not mine." That was the easy thing to say, but it also happened to be true. Eliezer patted Melech's neck. No better companion in

the world; but a silent one now. So let him be like that!

"Your steed is magnificent," Kala-Wek enthused, as if Eliezer (and Melech!) didn't know it already. "We had only the poor specimens of a few foolish thieves to use as models for our own creation." Kala-Wek stroked Melech's flank. "He'll carry you far and well."

"Yes," Eliezer agreed, "if only we knew in which direction." Eliezer checked his hip for his little velvet magic pouch with the *Mogen David* and Holy Name embroidered on the front. The crater floor stretched featurelessly all around, right up to the jagged rim.

Let us assume, Eliezer thought, it has not gone beyond the rim—for if it escaped that far, it could be anywhere in the whole world, and even Eliezer wouldn't live long enough to search the entire globe! He rode a short way from the city.

"The priests said to tell you to remember their words," Kala-Wek called after him. "May God be with you!" He bowed and led his people out of the hot and dry into the cool and watered, the city with its diminishing supplies of food and magic. *Mazel tov*, Eliezer silently wished them.

"So, Melech, are you speaking to me?" The horse returned a definite *Yes*. "And have you more insights?" On that, Melech was less forthcoming. "The day the word was found missing was the eleventh of Tammuz. But it could have—'departed'—before that."

I'm not comfortable with any of this, Melech complained.

"Could you be more specific?"

Why did they hide their magic?

Eliezer shrugged. "A private people, in their own world."

Melech nodded—a habit he'd picked up from lowly humans.

"So, let's see, what did the priests say? 'The sun will guide you.' Maybe they were trying to tell us something." Eliezer looked up into the sky. "All right, then, we'll go west." Melech was agreeable to the suggestion, and faced away from the morning sun, then walked slowly across the sands. "Keep your head down, and look carefully on the ground for anything unusual. I'll keep an eye on higher things." As was appropriate for the one with the soul, he mused, and allowed himself a smile.

Melech assured him he'd use his lower equine—and younger—eyes to full advantage. Meanwhile Eliezer scanned the rugged crater rim. A word has power—the *Kabbalah* was based on that fact—but without knowing the specific word what could he do? He couldn't employ the numerology needed to work the magic without knowing the letters and therefore the word's numerical value. So frustrating! The sands blew around Melech's feet, and Eliezer shaded his eyes with his free hand. Melech stopped suddenly.

"What is it?"

Look for yourself, Melech replied.

Eliezer stepped down, his legs sore but steady; despite the grumbling of his joints he squatted in the sand. Peeking through the blowing dust, never moving but blinking in and out of sight, was a black spot—so small only the sand's fineness and uniform color made it visible at all. What kind of crazy thing—? It was like a tiny hole in the desert that the sand couldn't

fill, a little black void that refused to be denied. They said nature hates a vacuum—but was this nature, or something beyond?

Eliezer knelt in the skittering sand and bowed over it like a *goy* in prayer. Up close it looked even blacker, almost a supernatural black, like the creatures Eliezer had once accidentally called up in his early days of conjuring. Bravely, he put his finger into the blackness, and raised the finger to his eyes. A dot of the black clung to his fingertip. He smelled the stuff, touched his tongue to it, and closed his eyes.

“Oy!” he moaned, covering his face with his hand. “Oyoyoy!”

Melech stared at him quizzically.

“May God forgive me for past transgressions!” he wailed, swaying back and forth on his haunches.

Melech asked him what the stuff *was*, already.

Eliezer gave him a sick look. “Ink!”

AT LEAST HE KNEW HE WAS ON THE RIGHT TRACK; FOR THAT HE COULD BE grateful. They kept moving westward, but no more of the “trail” appeared. That one spot, clinging tenaciously to the ground, remaining visible through the drifting dust for however many days, showed one thing: the word had tremendous power of endurance, it was a word of such importance that it magically asserted itself despite everything.

Melech wondered why any word would run away, and follow the sun in its course across the sky; but could suggest no possible reasons. They reached the foot of the crater wall, and Melech kicked at the loose sand sprinkled at the foot of the cliff. Eliezer dismounted and brought his eyes close to the ground, to no avail. He tried further up the wall, above the edge of the sand blanket covering the crater floor, past the ring of pebbles to the bare stone, to where the tooth-like peaks jabbed up at the sky. Sand pattered on his upper cheeks, and found its way between his teeth, so that he crunched with every movement of his jaw. Melech idly nosed pebbles around.

Eliezer grunted his way up the twenty feet or so of gently sloping cliff. “Do we keep going west?” he asked as he stood on top of the jagged crater wall, not expecting an answer. Beyond the crater was sheer desert, more blankness than Eliezer had ever seen from any vantage point. Such a desolate place—no wonder these crazy people loved their home so much; it was so beautiful! So what were they afraid to leave behind here? Nothing but dust-towers, parallel lines of dunes, sand and more sand, as far as the horizon. And within the crater, just the rockcity, and, between the city and himself, a few odd shadows cast by sand-whips or some such phenomenon snaking across the ground.

The city was right in the center, the exact focus of the perfectly circular wall. The whole thing reminded him of something, but he couldn’t quite say what. Three hours of riding, just for the view!

Eliezer descended once more, and as he did so—careful to keep from jarring his God-forsaken knees—he heard warning noises coming from the back of Melech’s mind. Nothing definite...but something amiss. Eliezer stood beside the horse and asked him what was going on. Melech hemmed

and hawed (such an annoying habit!), then said, I'm sure we're being followed.

"Followed? By whom? Our employers?"

Melech asked in turn, Is that so hard to believe? And Eliezer had to admit it wasn't. Melech's nose was sufficiently reliable to forestall doubt. Someone was trying to keep down-wind and far enough away to prevent Melech from becoming skittish. But of course whoever it was didn't know Melech had other ways of communicating discomfort to Eliezer.

Eliezer sat on some smooth rocks, resting his back against the cliff, and searched for those no-longer-mysterious shadows in the desert. He ate a little of the bread with which Kala-Wek's people had supplied him. It would serve his followers right, whoever they might be, to have to sit and watch him stuff himself while they went hungry and thirsty. Eliezer took a sugar cube from his provisions bag and Melech lazily lipped it up. "Enjoy."

The hot sun beamed down on them, almost straight overhead, but Eliezer's circulation was such that he didn't mind at all. "What we do now, Melech, I honestly don't know." After brushing breadcrumbs from his robes, Eliezer pushed himself up and remounted, deciding to scout the cliffs' inside base. The pursuer or pursuers, Melech reported, followed in step. Well, what would they do to him? Nothing—at least, until he found their word.

Look below, Melech advised, and Eliezer, too tired to step down, asked, "What?" The horse replied that while his eyes were not perfect, he was sure another spot lay beneath his feet.

"Are you joking?"

Melech replied negatively, his tone showing his displeasure at the question.

"Then let's continue in a clockwise direction, and see—"

Melech asked him, What are your plans?

"Weren't you listening? I said, we'll continue in a clockwise direction, and—"

Melech repeated the question, and Eliezer nearly slapped the horse's neck. "So now you've gone deaf? *Ach!* All right, I'll spell it out: we...will...walk...in...a...clockwise...direction...."

Clockwise.

Eliezer smacked his forehead, ready to burst. *Of course!* Such a stupid, useless head! Was this, then, the ultimate in God's curse? To be at the world's beck and call for almost all eternity, without enough brains to do the work? He looked over the crater once more: a giant circle with a protrusion in the middle whose shadow swept around the desert floor. Stupid!

He steered Melech back towards the city, one eye on the sand behind. He heard a slight rustling as his pursuers scrambled to change direction. Eliezer threw a few Hebrew words back at them, and both he and Melech turned their heads to see the results of the spell: four robed moles huddled in the sand, attempting to dig through the fine dust to find a home beneath.

When they arrived at the base of the mountain Eliezer looked up its sharp slope, and shook his head. "A senile old man I am," he said; "a fool I'm not." With a couple of words whose letters added up to 55, the same as in *nehsher*, he metamorphosed into an eagle and soared aloft. He passed the open windows of Al-ayar, through which fine curtains billowed, and young maidens (if only he were so young again!) looked out over the desert and combed their hair. They watched as he sailed ever higher, to the mountain's summit. There, he transformed back into his human shape, rubbed his aching arms, and stood unsteadily on the peak. Melech waited below, occasionally glancing up but repelled by the glare of the sun directly above Eliezer's head. Here he was, on the highest visible point of land sticking up out of the desert floor. And all around was the crater, looking remarkably like—

A sundial, of course.

Eliezer stroked his beard, and, saying a short prayer for strength and stamina, got down on his ancient knees on a narrow ledge of rock. If he ever got up again it would be a miracle. He pushed aside some pebbles and brushed away wisps of sand. Sure enough, huddled against the sunward side of the mountaintop was a little black formless mass.

"Hello," Eliezer said, with both relief and amazement. "You've caused quite a commotion, eh, little noun?" The word cringed, recoiling from Eliezer's appalling Unbeliever-hood, but Eliezer was not to be denied. "Don't be such a trouble-maker. Come." He reached out his hand. The word slunk back, leaving a tiny black speck on the rock. It couldn't afford to lose much more of its life-blood.

"The strongest belief makes the most powerful word," Eliezer said to it, knowing it couldn't understand. "Only one word in their language attracts so much belief it could gain enough power to get up and go for a stroll. Fortunately," he continued, pointing straight up to what its worshippers called the Beacon, "you *aren't* what you designate, or you'd be too hot to handle. *Oy!*" he moaned, as his knees scolded him. "In Hebrew your letters would add up to 55, too. A nice coincidence, eh? It's now noon. If I say the Holy Name in my head 55 times, would you stop aspiring to be what you signify? Would you stop following your original and begin following me?"

Eliezer passed his hand over the timid letters, blocking out the sun's rays and influence, and pronounced the Name. The letters relaxed, expanded, separated to form a true word. Eliezer averted his eyes so he wouldn't actually see the full word (something that was not for his "Barbarian," his "Unbeliever's" eyes!). He put his hand beside it so it could crawl up onto his palm. Such a frightened little thing—terrified of its new-found power, mobility, freedom. And who wouldn't be frightened, suddenly torn from home because of new powers, to wander the Earth in search of—? But the analogy was stretched, and—more importantly—a waste of time. He felt the wet thing slither along his palm, fortunately for both of them without leaving a trail, and transferred it into his pouch.

Eliezer became an eagle once more, and flew down to the window of his own room. He made sure his curtain was closed, and reassumed human

form in private so that none should know his mysteries; he was every bit as jealous of his magical secrets as Kala-Wek. Eliezer stepped out into the corridor, and made his way undetected to the priests' chamber. The fools had not trusted him with their secrets; didn't they realize he of all people would know the Magi's Code, that you don't encroach on another's secrets, or—worse—tell tales about them? What had they planned to do with him after learning his secrets?

The black tome lay still open at the day's reading. He stood on the wrong side of the book so that even at best he could only see the text upside down, then crouched so that his view was even worse—all he saw was a series of blurred, parallel black lines. He flipped back four pages, and sure enough found in the left-hand page a glaring white spot, like a tiny sun itself interrupting the surrounding blackness. He took his pouch from under his belt and pulled open the puckered mouth, then lay the pouch on the blemished page.

"Nu, go home," Eliezer said; "and don't go touring around again." He repeated the Holy Name twice, and added a few words of incantation. The word peeked out of the bag meekly at first, then waggled its capital boldly. With a hop the whole word—letters all in proper order—leapt *onto* the page (such a switch from the usual!). It slithered through the ranks of its fellows, elongating and squeezing as needed, until it found the blank space awaiting it, the one it had left behind when drawn by the climax of the real sun's rise through the sky five days ago, the solstice. The word settled in, resuming its place, and only its slightly lighter shade—the effect of its ink-losses through injury and maybe evaporation—kept it from blending completely into the parallel lines of text. Someone would have to get out a pen and touch it up.

Eliezer returned the book to its proper page. "Now, little friends," he said, "how can I convince you to stay where you belong?" It wouldn't take much for another word to get it into its—head? first letter?—to run away like its fellow. "Your power is great, but must flow to others, not remain in yourselves." He waved his hand over the book and chanted a few words, then drew the letter *aleph* in the air above it. "All words are one, and they are the words of God, as is everything. Become again what you are meant to be: the source and symbol of the faith of those who read you. No longer aspire to be that which you merely represent." The words hit home in his own head and heart, but he merely sighed and said, "*Omain*."

Satisfied, Eliezer stretched up to full height once more, and his arthritis punished him for his audacity. At that moment came a barked, "What are you doing here?" Eliezer turned and saw Kala-Wek standing in the doorway, feet wide apart and hand on his ceremonial dagger.

"What you asked me to do," Eliezer replied.

"What?" Kala-Wek scanned the room, his expression bearing none of his earlier amiability. "Where are the priests?"

"By now, making a home under your sand-moat." Eliezer congratulated himself on his bon-mot; Melech, listening in, groaned softly to make his feelings clear. "They followed me, thinking to steal my knowledge—for the city's benefit or their own, I don't know—or kill me should I learn theirs."

He shrugged. "Whether they were doing so on your orders or were acting on their own, that's none of my business. They'll be back soon—after the spell wears off—and you can take it up with them, either for the attempt or their failure in it."

Kala-Wek said nothing for a second or two, then asked, "And the word, Wizard?"

"It shines once more from the page, and should stay there from now on. And I have not sullied your sacred words with my—" He turned the sarcasm on full-strength: "*—heathenish* vision!"

Kala-Wek relaxed and even cracked a smile, removing his hand finally from the dagger. "Well done, Wizard. You have lived up to your reputation, and you have saved my people and my home."

And your Princely station, Eliezer added silently (may God forgive his cynicism, especially if he was wrong). Eliezer bowed. "My horse awaits outside."

"So I noticed. But how did you find the word? *Where* did you find it? What—?"

Eliezer cut him off with a wave. "Please, so many questions! It's so simple even my horse could figure it out. Your belief made the little wanderer think it had *become* what it merely *meant*, and followed your 'Beacon' around." Such a term for God's first creation! "Then, at the solstice, it naturally climbed as high as it could—higher than *I* could, with just these old bones—reaching for its source." Enough explanation. "My job is done, and I must go. Lead me out, and I'll be on my way."

"As you wish." Kala-Wek silently led him through the stone hallways, past gawking women and children, and men with apparently no work to do. A paradise—all they needed with little labor—so no wonder they feared being thrown out into the world to search for a few pieces of bread, a little water, a place to lay one's head. It was understandable, all right.

Downstairs, Eliezer mounted his horse, whose bridle Kala-Wek unnecessarily held for him.

"Thank you, Eliezer Ben-Avraham!" Kala-Wek said. "You are indeed a great wizard!"

Eliezer shrugged dismissively. "It is God's power, not mine; and God's will if I succeed or fail."

Melech nodded—a little *too* enthusiastically, perhaps—at Eliezer's formulaic farewell. Then they turned their backs on Kala-Wek, Al-ayar, and the whole strange adventure. Neither said anything until they'd crossed the crater rim through the pass they'd earlier traversed. At last, as they re-entered the Desert of Alakhar, and turned toward the path of their normal rounds, Melech said something about their need to be more selective in choosing their assignments, and avoiding strange people who had extremely strange problems.

"Not another word," Eliezer said. "Please, God, not another word!" ♣

Legend

Catherine MacLeod

RACHELLE'S MOTHER HAD WARNED HER ABOUT this, reading her mythology instead of fairy tales. The Minotaur had always scared her.

He still did. Her stalker knew this maze of alleys and fences, and he was climbing the stairs she'd hidden under. An inch of splintered wood between them: she could hear the wet snort of his breath.

Of all the nights to miss her bus stop. How far had he followed before she'd noticed? She cursed herself for panicking; running like prey; getting lost in the labyrinth. But lost she was.

And prey.

Rachelle eased into a low crouch, preparing to move. She knew this story had two endings, but not if she had the courage for either. She did know that legends rarely gave the hero a choice. Unlike fairy tales.

Sometimes Prince Charming was a no-show, but you could always count on the monster in the maze. 🍁

Closing Time

Matthew Johnson

NEP GAO STOOD ON HIS TIPTOES IN THE QUIET garden to the back of the restaurant, working his small silver knife along the thinnest branches of the prickly ash tree, and wondered when his father's ghost would leave the party. He had died five days ago and was still holding court, entertaining all his old friends and customers.

It was just his luck, Gao thought, that his father had died in the middle of qinshon season, the few weeks when the tree's buds had their best flavor. Already, chewing carefully, he could detect a bitter note in what he had just harvested. At the rate things were going his father's ghost would still be around in a week, when the qinshon would be inedible. This was usually their most profitable time of year, but so long as his father was enjoying the food and the company enough to stay on Earth, Gao was bound to provide food and drink to anyone who came to pay their respects. So far there had been no shortage of mourners, most of them just happening to come around dinner time and often even staying till past dawn.

With his basket full of tightly curled green buds clutched under his arm, Gao went back into the restaurant. Though it was only midmorning someone in the front room was playing a zither, shouting out parts of the Epic of the Hundred and One Bandits. Louder, though, was his father's commentary on the action as it was sung: "That bandit's pretty clever, but not as clever as that butcher that used to try to sell tame ducks as wild. Nobody but me could smell the difference from the blood in the carcass!"; and, "I heard the great Xan Te play that verse once when I was on a trip to Lamnai. He hardly had a tooth in his head, but he ate two whole boxes of

my pork dumplings.”

Gao could not help blushing when he heard his father telling the same tales he had told a thousand times before. He had never done anything but run the restaurant, never traveled except to buy food or collect recipes, but to hear him tell it he had had more adventures than all the Hundred and One Bandits put together. Gao could not count the number of times he had heard his father tell the story of how he had gotten his trademark recipe—the garlicky duck from which he had taken his name, Doi Thiviei—from a hermit who had lived in a hut that was at the top of a mountain when he arrived in the afternoon but at the bottom of a valley when he left at dawn. The zither player had fallen silent to hear the story and Gao could see a half-dozen others kneeling on mourning stools, listening and chatting as they ate the leftovers of the previous night’s meals.

“And then, just when I opened my eyes, I saw—nhoGao, is that you? Don’t lurk in the doorway, son, come in and sit down. I’m just at the good part.”

“I am sorry, Father, but I must start to cook for today’s mourners.”

“Oh, well, all right then. Bring us some fresh tea and some red bean dumplings, will you? Now, where was I? Oh yes—when I opened my eyes, I saw that the hut, which the night before had been on a mountaintop—”

Gao picked up the empty bowls, hurried on to the kitchen before his father could think of anything else to ask for. He could not help but notice that his father looked no more vaporous than he had the day before, and felt guilty for wishing it otherwise. For most people the mourning party was a formality, a way to make the spirit linger for a day or two at the most. It was supposed to be an expense—if it was too short, cost too little, there would be doubts about one’s respect for one’s father—but not a ruinous one. Sighing, Gao laid the qinshon buds onto a square of silk which he then tied into a bundle; any rougher cloth would rub their skins harshly and make them lose their flavor. That done he put a pot of water on to boil and looked around the kitchen, wondering what he could make as cheaply as possible that would not offend the mourners. He sipped the chicken broth that had been simmering since the night before, tossed in the bones from last night’s dinner. He could put pork dumplings into the broth, make a soup with noodles and fava beans, top it with chive flowers from the garden. For the next course he could deep-fry thin strips of pork in batter; if he made it hot enough he might be able to use a pig that wasn’t so expensive.

Feeling hungry now, he pried one of the stones in the floor loose, lifted the lid off the shallow earthenware pot that lay below, reached in and pulled out a pickled pig’s knuckle. Looking carefully over each shoulder he took a bite. He had promised to give up eating pork when he and Mau-Pin Mienme had become engaged, but nothing calmed him down when he was nervous the way pork knuckles did. Her family were followers of the Southerner—her name meant Sweet Voice From The South—and so did not eat meat at all. When she had insisted that he at least give up eating pork it had taken him less than a second to agree. It had taken him only a

day, following that, to realize that he could not possibly keep his promise, so he had bought a pot of pigs' knuckles one day while she and her family were at prayer and hidden it under the floor in the kitchen, so that she would never know what a dishonorable man she was marrying.

His mouth was now full of the sweet, salty, vinegar taste of the pigs' knuckles and he could feel it easing his mind. It was true: he was a dishonorable man, dishonest and unfilial, breaking his word to his wife-to-be and wishing his father's ghost would leave him alone. He doubted that even Mienme, who like all of her faith had studied to be an advocate to the dead in the Courts of Hell, could convince the Judge of Fate to send him back as anything nobler than a frog. He sighed. It was only because he was due to inherit a good business that Mienme's father, a lawyer on Earth as well as the next world, was allowing her to marry him at all. He had always known how unlikely it was that he should be able to marry a woman like Mienme. She was beautiful and intelligent, while he was cursed with an overfed body and the doughy face that had made his father call him "Glutinous Rice." He knew better than to question the divine blessing that made her love him, though, and he had believed since they were children they would one day be married. In all that time he had never imagined it might be his father that would be the problem.

Thinking of Mienme made him want to see her, have her listen to his problems as she had so often done. Like other women who followed the Southerner she was allowed to go out alone, to spread his Word, and he thought she would most likely be at South Gate Market this time of day. That would work out well enough; he could get all of the vegetables he needed there, and buy the pig later in the day when he was alone. Seeing her face, and hearing her advice, would be more than worth the extra trip. After carefully putting the pot back under the floor stone he opened a small jar in the shelf, took out a boiled egg marinated in soy sauce and popped it in his mouth to cover the smell of the pork knuckle. Then he poured boiling water into the large teapot, put a few of the red bean dumplings he had baked the night before onto a tray, took tray and tea into the front room where his father was still spinning his tales to a rapt audience.

"—of course, a chicken that laid eggs with two yolks would be worth a lot of money today, though we didn't think like that in those days. No, we only hoped she would survive the trip home so we could make Double August Sunrise for the Emperor—nhoGao, you've brought the dumplings. Won't you stay and hear this story?" His father was, if anything, more solid than when he had last seen him, the party more lively as noon approached.

"I'm sorry, Father, I have to go to the South Gate Market to buy food for dinner."

"Well, that's all right, I suppose. Do bring me back some of those preserved mushrooms, and some sweet beer for our friend here, whose throat must be getting dry." The zither player had not sung a word since Doi Thiviei started talking, nor was he likely to for the rest of the day, but Gao

nodded dutifully before stepping back into the kitchen.

Once out of his father's sight he picked up the rag that held his shopping list and wrote "sweet beer" on it with a piece of charcoal. His father did not like him reading, saying every other generation had learned to memorize their customers' orders, but on the other hand Mienme said if he were illiterate he would not be able to read the charges in the Court of Hell and his advocate would not be able to help him. He had to admit it meant he took fewer trips to the market, since without a list he always forgot something. He folded the list, strapped his grocery basket on his back and went out into the street.

The streets between the restaurant and the market were crowded, even in the heat before noon, and the wind blowing from the west carried a heavy scent of medicinal incense. Someone in the Palace must be sick, he thought. As the massive iron pillars of the South Gate came into view the smell of the incense was met and quickly defeated by that of spices, sizzling oil and a dozen different kinds of meat cooking. Pausing for a moment, Gao closed his eyes, tested himself the way his father had done when he was a child, making himself find his way around the market by smell alone. There, off to his right, someone was making salt-and-pepper shrimp, heating the iron pan until the shells cracked, releasing tiny gasps of garlic and red pepper-scented steam. To his left someone else was frying mat tran on a griddle, making sure they would have enough for the lunch rush customers to wrap around their pork-and-kelp rice.

Satisfied, Gao opened his eyes again, scanning the crowd for Mienme's familiar face. He found her standing just inside the gate, handing out block-printed tracts to a family of confused-looking farmers. One, an older man with a white-streaked beard and a broad bamboo hat, was listening politely while the others kept a tight rein on the pigs they had brought with them. Gao waited until the farmer had accepted the pamphlet and moved on before approaching.

"You do your faith and your father honor," he said formally when she noticed him. Though they were engaged, there were still certain proprieties to be observed when in public.

Or so he felt; Mienme often seemed to disagree. "You know as well as I do that none of them can read," she said, shaking her head. "Our temple offers free lessons, but they won't stay in the city long enough for that. Besides, only the Master could convince a pork farmer to give up meat."

"And you try nevertheless," Gao said. "Such determination will serve you well when you argue cases before the Judge of Fate."

"That's very sweet, *nhoGao*," she said, making him blush at the use of his childhood name. She was dressed in the brown cotton robe and leggings all her faith wore when preaching, and from a distance she might almost have looked like a man. "But you don't have to reassure me, I'm not about to lose my faith—I'm just hot and tired, that's all. Why are you looking so glum?"

He shrugged slightly. He had not realized his mood was so apparent, resolved to better hide it from his father. "The mourning party is still going

on today. If this continues my father's ghost will outlast his restaurant."

"What is it now, four days?"

"Five. My father is enjoying his party so much I think he is happier now than when he was alive."

Mienme put up her hood and extended her hand to him. With her face hidden anyone who saw them would see only a young man helping a monk through the crowded streets. "It's the food everyone's coming for. Couldn't you do something to it, put in something bitter so they won't like it so much?" she asked. "You could say it was a mistake."

"If I made a mistake like that, my father would stay another ten years just to punish me."

They stopped at a vegetable stand and Gao haggled with the merchant for beans and cabbage while Mienme seemed lost in thought. "I've got it," she finally said after they had put their groceries in the basket on Gao's back and moved on. "Remember the night my parents came to the restaurant and you made Temple Style Duck?"

"How could I forget?" Gao asked. "Your parents thought I was insulting them, making beancurd so that it tasted like duck. My father thought I was insulting the duck!"

"Exactly. Make him that and when he complains, say you're concerned about what the Judge of Fate will find if he keeps on eating meat after his death. That way it'll cool the party down and you'll only be acting out of filial affection."

"That's true." Gao thought for a moment. "That's an excellent idea. You really are too smart to be wasted on a person like me."

Mienme laughed. "I know. I took an oath to defend the hopeless, remember?"

FIVE HOURS LATER GAO HELD HIS BREATH AS HE LIFTED THE STEAMER BASKET'S long oval lid. All around him lay the remains of the beancurd, sweet potato, arrowroot, and other vegetables he had used. He did not make Temple Style very often—even most followers of the Southerner did not eat it; it had been created for high-ranking converts who wanted their vegetarianism to be as painless as possible—but he enjoyed the artistry it involved, matching flavors and textures in a way that was almost magical. Gao, the youngest of his father's four sons, had mostly learned cooking from his mother, and she had been the vegetable cook. For that reason his father and brothers had been responsible for the meat dishes the restaurant was famous for and he had been left to take care of the vegetables and small items like dumplings. But his brothers had all left, one by one, to start their own restaurants in other cities, and for the last few years he had been doing all the cooking himself, his father only planning the menus—menus he had changed, slightly, to include more vegetables and some of the things he had learned cooking for Mienme.

When the steam coming out of the basket cleared he could see, inside, something that looked almost exactly like thin slices of barbecued duck, grayish-white with streaks of an almost impossible red. Getting it to look

right was the easy part, of course; the flavor and the smell were harder, and much more important. He carefully lifted the slices out with a slotted spoon and slid them into a waiting skillet full of oil and the sauce needed to complete the illusion. In seconds the oil sealed the outside of the slices, browning them and making the red streaks even brighter. He lifted the smallest piece to his mouth, burning his tongue slightly tasting it. It was perfect, better even than the cooks at the Temple made it. It had taken him months to duplicate their recipe, making sure he had it right before he could even invite Mienme's parents to dinner, but he had also improved it, giving it that crackling texture the Temple cooks had never managed. This was the dish he made better than anyone else—Trianha Thiviei, Temple Style Duck. This ought to be his name, not Glutinous Rice, something he had made every day for the poorest customers because his brothers were making more complicated things. He could not change his name while his father was still around, of course, but soon, perhaps...

Gao sighed, asking forgiveness for wishing his father gone, took the remaining slices out of the skillet then laid them on a waiting bed of steamed and salted greens and white rice. He took the plate with rice, greens and "duck" in one hand and a platter with ten small bowls on it in the other and went out to the front room.

"—so there we were, bound to make dinner for an official of the Fifth Rank and his family and all the salt brokers on strike—nhoGao, have you brought dinner?" The crowd of mourners had grown since the afternoon, with the new arrivals more than making up for the few that had left—word that one of the best restaurants in town was giving out free food had gotten around.

Gao nodded, not quite able to speak. For all of the justification Mienme had given him he could not escape the fact that he was giving his father something he would not like. Someone was rolling his stomach into dumplings as he spooned out the first bowl of trianha thiviei.

His father sniffed at the bowl. "Is this duck?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

No sense adding a lie to his long list of crimes. "No, Father—it's Temple Style. I made it because—because Mienme was worried about what will happen when you stand before the Judge of Fate."

"Is that so? What a kind girl she is." His father took up his sticks, brought a piece to his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

"Yes, Father. She is very concerned about your trial." Gao felt like red pepper pickle had been poured down his throat, wondered what punishments awaited him as a result of this.

"You know," his father said finally, "maybe it's because I'm dead, but I don't think I gave this stuff a fair chance last time. It's really quite good—and for my soul, too, eh?" He laughed. Gao echoed him nervously. "Needs a bit more salt, though. Which reminds me, I was just telling them the story of the big salt brokers' strike—you know this one, it's a good story—"

Gao nodded, served the other mourners silently then went out the front

door, leaned hard against the wall. He was not sure which was worse, that the plan had failed or that he had hoped it would succeed. Either way things were no better—his father was enjoying his mourning party as much as ever and the number of guests was only increasing.

As he stood in the cool, incense-perfumed night air Nep Gao became aware of bells ringing in the distance. Not the familiar dull tone of temple bells but a higher chime, three strokes, silence, three strokes. The palace bells, he realized. Whoever it was they had been burning incense for earlier—and from the number of bells it had to be an official of the Third Rank, someone in the royal family—had died. He had just pieced this together when he heard a voice call his name. He turned, saw coming down the dark street a man with two heads, one higher than the other. Gao squinted to see better but the second head was still there.

“Yes?” he asked, wondering if this was an agent of the Courts of Hell come to take him to his punishment early.

“We require a service of you,” the man said. He stepped into the small pool of light cast by the torch above the door and showed himself to be two men, one riding in a basket on the other’s back. It was the man in the basket, wearing the lacquered red headdress of an official of the seventh rank, who had spoken. Gao immediately dropped to his knees.

“How can your humble servant help you?” he asked, unable to keep from staring at the man’s dangling feet in their white deerskin slippers. That was the reason for the basket, of course; the slippers, which had to be a gift from someone in the royal family, could not be permitted to touch the ground in this part of the city, but the street was too narrow for a palanquin.

“The Emperor’s favorite uncle has died,” the man said. “We are preparing the mourning party for him and have heard of the effect your cooking has had. The Emperor would like the honor shown to his uncle that has been shown to your father.”

“I’m not sure I can—” Gao began, beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

“The Emperor would consider it an insult if the same honor was not shown to his uncle,” the man said firmly. “Take this.” The man handed a small jade token to the servant whose back he was riding, who then handed it to Gao. “This will let you and anyone helping you onto the palace grounds. You may keep it when you are done.” Without waiting for an answer he gave his mount a quick kick in the thigh, making him turn around and head back down the street.

Minutes later Gao was lying on the mat in the back dining room, a bag of cold clay on his head and a dozen mint leaves in his mouth. He chewed the mint to control heartburn, but it was not helping tonight.

“How did it go?” Mienme’s voice came from the window.

Gao stood up, opened the door. Mienme pulled herself through the window by her arms, still the adventurous girl she had always been. “Worse and worse,” he said, and proceeded to tell her everything that had happened.

"Actually," she said after he had finished his litany, "this could work out well for us."

"How can this be good?" Gao asked, accidentally swallowing the mass of mint in his mouth. "The restaurant is already nearly broke, and now we have to serve food fit for an official of the Third Rank. We'll be ruined—I'll be lucky if I escape with my head."

"Just listen," Mienme said. "Your father can't complain if you give all the best food to the royal mourning party—imagine what that jade token on the wall could do for business at his restaurant. So you can't be blamed for just serving him simple food, and when you do that the mourners will stop coming, and the party will be over."

"You may be right," he said slowly. He drew the token out from his belt pouch, ran his fingers over its cool, smooth surface. "Yes, of course. If we're cooking for the Emperor's uncle, he can't complain if we give him nothing but rice and millet gruel. Even the Judge of Fate couldn't complain." He held the token up against the wall. "I must have done a very good deed in my last life to deserve you."

"In that case," she said, grinning impishly, "come here and give me a kiss while you're still all minty."

Sometimes he wondered if her parents knew their daughter at all.

THE NEXT MORNING HE WAS UP AT DAWN, FISHING CARP OUT OF THE POND in the back garden. Once the fish were splashing in their wooden bucket he took his small knife and cut a half-dozen lilies from the surface of the pond to make into a sauce for the fish—fish fresh enough for the Emperor's uncle. These were the last two items he needed for the day's meals; after making sure the jade token was still in his belt pouch he went into the kitchen, put on his grocery basket, and went out into the front room. His father's ghost was regaling two or three sleepy mourners with his adventures, while several more lay sprawled on sleeping mats around the room.

"—of course, a pig that smart you don't eat all at —nhoGao, do you have breakfast ready already?"

"I can't cook for you today, Father, remember? I left a crabmeat and pork casserole in the oven, you can ask one of the mourners to get it out for you in a few hours, and I'll send you dumplings for the afternoon."

"Of course, of course—I'd almost forgotten. You'll do us proud at the palace, I'm sure—and what a story it'll make, cooking for the Emperor's uncle." Despite his words he did not seem very happy, and Gao wondered if he was finally starting to fade. Crab and pork casserole was not exactly gruel, but it was not the food Doi Thiviei was used to, either. He felt a sudden pain in his chest, hoped that if his father were to depart today it would not be until after he got back to the restaurant.

He had never been to the palace before. Despite the fact that it was at the center of the city, few people ever received an invitation to go. Those who went without an invitation, hoping to poach the Emperor's white deer, usually wound up as permanent guests—or came home over

the course of several days, one piece at a time. As he reached the gate he could not help worrying that the whole thing had been a colossal hoax, that the guards would take his jade seal and his groceries and send him away. When he showed them the token, however, they stood to either side of the gate, and one was assigned to lead him to the palace kitchens.

"How long ago did the noble official die?" Gao asked the soldier.

The man walked a few steps in silence before finally answering. "Yesterday afternoon," he said. Like most soldiers he had a heavy provincial accent, which perhaps explained his reluctance to speak. "Didn't you hear the bells?"

"I've been busy," Gao muttered. "Have you seen his ghost?"

The soldier again kept silent for a few moments, then spoke, no expression crossing his face. "No. But I hear it is very pale. He was an old man, and sick for a long time."

Gao cursed inwardly. Except for short, violent deaths, long illnesses were the worst. They left a person glad to die, and not inclined to hang around too long afterward. He thanked the guard when they reached the kitchen and got to work unpacking his groceries. He had planned a light breakfast, fried wheat noodles sprinkled with sugar and black vinegar, in case the ghost was not too solid. Then he hoped that by lunch he would be able to serve the carp balls in lotus sauce and crisply fried eel to a receptive audience.

It was not to be. The Emperor's uncle was vaporous, not interested in talking or even listening to the zither. The mourning party was somber, the guests mostly relatives and lower officials who were attending out of duty rather than friendship. They picked at the delicacies Gao served, leaving the rest for palace servants, who could not believe their luck. The ghost, meanwhile, ate only a bite from each dish, pausing neither to smell nor taste any of them.

By mid-afternoon Gao was getting nervous. He had not managed to keep the Emperor's uncle from fading at all, knew that the official who had hired him would not be pleased. If he could have managed even two or three days things would have been all right, but if he could only make the royal ghost stay a day and a night it would look like an insult. He wished Mienme was there to help him.

Finally he resolved there was only one thing he could do: make the most elaborate, most spectacular dish he could, so that he would not be faulted for lack of effort. He settled on a recipe one of his brothers had found in a small village on the southern coast, mau anh dem—Yellow Lantern Fish. He sent a runner to the fish market for the freshest yellowfish he could find, telling him to look for clear eyes and a smell of seaweed. When the boy returned he began to carefully cut and notch the scaled, gutted fish and boil a deep pot of oil on a portable burner.

Minutes before dinner was due he ordered the burner be carried into the room where the mourning party was taking place, followed behind carrying the fish himself. Though he could not look at the faces of any of the guests he could tell few if any of them wanted to be there. The most

enthusiastic of them, if not the wisest, were using this as an opportunity to get drunk. Even the zither player sounded almost as though he was singing in his sleep. At the middle of it all was the ghost, silent and uninterested in what was going on around him.

Gao had the burner and pot of oil placed in front of the royal ghost, waited a few minutes while the oil returned to the proper temperature. Then, with enough of a flourish to make sure all eyes were on him, he dropped the fish into the oil. In seconds it blossomed out like a paper lantern, its flesh turning golden and crispy. It was a dish designed to impress even the most jaded crowd, and it did not fail him: the guests pressed forward to get a better look and eagerly handed him their plates. Before the first bite was taken, however, Gao knew he had failed. Unlike the guests the Emperor's uncle was still withdrawn, uninterested, not bothering to eat or even smell the fish.

My life is over, Gao thought as he walked home. If the Emperor's uncle had faded away by morning he would be blamed, and that was sure to kill business if it did not kill him. Just then he realized that in all of his worry about the Emperor's uncle he had forgotten to send the lunch dumplings he had made for his father's mourning party. Without food the party was sure to have broken up by now, his father likely faded away. He suddenly regretted not listening to any of the stories his father had told over the last few weeks, too busy cooking and worrying about the restaurant. He had heard them all a dozen or more times, but now might never get a chance to hear them again.

When he neared the restaurant, however, he saw lights inside and heard voices. Creeping into the front dining room he saw his father still holding court before a half-dozen mourners, the room strewn with empty bowls and teacups.

"Who Gao, is that you?" his father asked, spotting him as he tried to slink past into the kitchen. "How did it go at the palace?"

Gao shook his head slowly. "I am sorry I was not able to send you the food I made for the day," he said. "I was busy with—"

"Don't worry about us—we don't need food to keep the party going. Besides, I know where you hide the pig knuckles. Now, where was I—"

Watching his father, more solid than ever, Gao wondered what it was he had done so wrong at the palace and so right here. He had made dishes for the Emperor's uncle that were twice as elaborate as anything he had ever made at the restaurant, but had left the royal ghost cold. His father, meanwhile, looked likely to remain among the living indefinitely on a diet of pig's knuckles. I must be missing something, he thought. If only Mienme were here to help me think. She would say, if it's not the food—

"Father, can you come with me for a few minutes?" he asked suddenly, interrupting his father in the middle of the story of the seo nuc game he had played against a beggar who had turned out to be an exiled general.

"I suppose," his father said, puzzled. "I can finish this story later. Where are we going?"

Without pausing to answer his father's questions Gao rushed back to

the palace, flashing the jade token to the puzzled guard. The mourning party was down to just a few diehards, likely trying to win points with the Emperor. The royal ghost was hardly visible, a thin gray mist barely recognizable as once having been human.

"Please excuse me, noble officials," Gao said, dropping to the floor and bowing low. "I forgot the most important part of the mourning party."

A few seconds of silence passed as the guests watched him curiously, wondering what he was going to produce that might top the Yellow Lantern Fish. Finally his father said, "What a glum group. Reminds me of my father the day our prize rooster died, the one who would crow every time a rich customer was coming—" The guests looked at the chatty ghost in amazement, but Gao's father made straight for the Emperor's uncle. "Did he try to feed you that Temple Style Duck? I only ask because you're looking a little thin. The first time I met one of those Southerners I thought they were crazy, won't eat meat, won't eat fowl, not even fish. But I met one who was a wizard with rice—learned a few tricks from him—"

By the time dawn came Doi Thiviei and the Emperor's uncle were chatting like old friends. The royal ghost was looking much more substantial and even accepted one of the sesame balls with hot lotus paste Gao had made for breakfast.

"Gao, I think I'll stay here awhile," his father said. "I hope it won't disappoint my mourners, but I've gotten a little tired of hearing my own voice. Take good care of my restaurant, will you?"

"Of course," Gao answered, ladling out the clear soup he had made from chicken stock and the last of the qinshon leaves.

"And I suppose you'll be marrying that Southerner girl and changing the name your mother and I gave you. I know you've never liked it, though it's a good story how you got it."

Gao frowned. "I always thought it was because—well, my face—and I always had to make it for the customers who couldn't afford anything else."

"No, no," his father said. "It wasn't like that at all. You see, when I first met your mother—but I suppose you don't have time to hear this story."

Gao sat down, took a sip of the soup, enjoying the fragile flavor of the qinshon. He only allowed himself one bowl a year, to be sure he would appreciate it. "I have plenty of time, Father," he said. "Only please, let me go get Mienme so she can hear it as well. We will both need to know this story so we can tell it to our children."

It turned out his father had lots of stories he had never told; or maybe Gao had just never heard them before. ❀

The Gate of Heavenly Peace

E. L. Chen

THE *ZHI* FIRST MADE HERSELF KNOWN TO ME through a keening wail that sliced through the humid air. The sound reminded me of the Chinese opera to which my grandmother had listened in the luxury of my parents' suburban Toronto home.

Otherwise the demonstration hadn't changed much since martial law had been declared more than a week ago. More students, in fact, were bussing in from the provinces to join the hunger strike. Although Beijing was surrounded by troops, the only danger was running out of the tampons and two-ply toilet paper that my mother had insisted I'd need. (It turned out that such capitalist luxuries were available at the Friendship Store, a delightfully dystopian establishment that catered to foreigners only.)

Similarly, my only concern was how to convince the cute photographer that I wasn't just another goody two-shoes Nice Chinese Girl who wanted to be the next Connie Chung. An ambitious endeavor, since at first glance I resembled the other eight million people in Beijing. It had been two weeks and Craig still mistook unsuspecting women for the smartass young writer he'd been paired with.

As we passed through the broad, scarlet arches of Tiananmen—the Gate of Heavenly Peace—the noise hit me again. A high-pitched bleat, anguished and confused. And alone, which seemed impossible in this bustling square.

I glanced at Craig to see if he'd heard it too. He was too occupied with snapping photos of the local scenery—tents of plastic sheeting and chain-smoking university students—to notice anything amiss. I guessed he was still excited about our article. When we'd first arrived to cover Gorbachev's visit, we'd had no idea that it would turn into a media goldmine. The most I'd hoped for was a protest or two to liven up my dull analysis of Sino-Soviet relations.

I pulled my mini cassette recorder from my shoulder bag and began to speak in the stark poetry of journalism. "White headbands with red slogans obscured by sweat and dust. Greasy hair and cigarette smoke. Gauze masks to hide their identities." Despite the heat, I wished I had a mask as well. "The overwhelming smell of unwashed bodies, tobacco, improvised latrines.

"I don't speak the language but it doesn't matter. These kids know what's really important to a good story."

As if on cue, a hollow-cheeked young man spotted Craig's camera and detached himself from his friends. When he was sure Craig was watching, he dashed aside his cigarette, climbed atop a parked car, and waved a red banner splashed with angry black characters.

"That's it, that's it...beautiful!" Craig said as he let his shutter fly. He sounded like a fashion photographer.

"Beautiful," I repeated into the tape recorder. A second later, the student was back with his friends and lighting up another cigarette.

"If that shot doesn't get me a Pulitzer, I'll—"

I never heard what Craig would have done; the keening whine reverberated within my eardrums again. *A lost animal*, I thought, *or one trapped in a cage*.

I switched off the tape recorder and poked Craig in the back. It was good timing on my part; he'd been about to halt a passing young woman who wore a white T-shirt and blue jeans similar to mine.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"What?"

"Did you hear that noise?" I yelled. "Sounded like an animal crying."

"How the fuck can you hear anything over this racket?"

True enough. I flicked the recorder back on and continued, "Workers marching through the square, chanting slogans through megaphones. People shouting from windows in nearby buildings. Paramedics with syringes of glucose checking everyone for malnutrition and dehydration. Loudspeakers blaring 'Ode to Joy' at full volume."

It must have been feedback from the loudspeakers that I'd heard. *Combined with dementia*, I thought wryly, *thanks to humidity, claustrophobia, and the psychological effect of being surrounded by thousands of people who look like me but are worlds apart in difference*. In this land, which had long been the West's exotic Other, I was the one who felt alien and alienated, anxious as if any minute someone would point me out as an impostor. Like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—the 70s remake—when the pod people betray the few remaining humans with a shrill cry.

I glanced at Craig—*damn, he's cute*—and noticed a casually dressed man regarding him as surreptitiously as I was. Plainclothes cop, most likely. Great. The last thing we needed was an interrogation by the local authorities, especially when this story was so hot. I caught Craig's eye and signaled that we should split and regroup at the Beijing Hotel—fast.

WE RETURNED TO THE SQUARE AT AROUND ELEVEN. CRAIG WAS INTENT ON capturing some artsy night shots, and I'd been going stir crazy in my hotel room. There was always the bar downstairs, but I was reluctant to socialize with my international colleagues. Especially when crowd-pleasing American reporter Wendy Ng was their chosen poster girl for overseas Chinese. I was tired of making patronizing small talk as they tried to sniff out whatever inside information they assumed I had on this story. *Ha ha, that's very flattering, but I think Wendy makes a better Connie Chung than I do... No, I haven't read The Joy Luck Club yet... Actually, the only thing my parents escaped from the "old country" was Hong Kong's low income tax rate...*

"Something's up," Craig said. He was decked out in a baseball cap, tinted glasses and a long-sleeved T-shirt so that he wouldn't stand out like a—well, like a tall hairy white guy in Tiananmen Square. "There's a crowd by the Monument to the People's Heroes."

I wasn't sure how he could tell. The square was almost at the same capacity as it had been during the day; only the intersecting parades of workers had been replaced by curious locals who had come to press food, water and support on their student heroes. To the west, green and pale yellow lights illuminated the pillars of the Great Hall of the People. Lamps provided additional lighting, as well as the flare of a match every time a student lit up. Which was often.

Guanyin, the Chinese goddess of mercy, is said to occasionally take the form of a bodhisattva with a thousand arms. But even if she had dragged her fingernails across a giant chalkboard, it would not have undone my eardrums like the ululation that split the night.

There—in the distance, in front of a double row of bicycles, I saw four slim legs that tapered into hooves.

"Did you see that?" I asked Craig excitedly.

"See what?"

The masses parted for a brief, fateful second. I fumbled in my bag for my tape recorder. "Goat-like," I said quickly. "Long, straight slender horn in the center of its high forehead. Mottled gray and brown pelt, bare patches in some places. Protruding ribs but distended belly. Appears to be more underfed than the students."

It dipped its highly bridged head below its knees, then tilted it toward the sky, its arched throat emitting that inhuman sound. I watched, fascinated, yet perplexed that no one else thought it out of the ordinary. I didn't think that goats were common in Beijing—at least, not in urban 1989 Beijing. And the only Chinese one-horned creature I knew of was the *qi-lin*, a mythical beast that was a shaggy mixture of lion and horse. The animal before me was too pathetic, too shabby to be anything but

depressingly real.

"What are you staring at?" asked Craig.

"That goat."

"I don't see anything."

I looked back toward the parked bicycles. It was gone. "Damn it," I said. "Come on, we've got to find it. How many exposures do you have left?"

"For a *goat*? You're out of your fuckin' mind."

It was hard to disagree with six feet plus of Aryan-blond hair, baby blues and good, old-fashioned Western machismo. But I did anyway.

"It's a great lead," I protested. "It must mean something." The East has a reputation of poeticism; however, the unromantic truth is that the most trivial gesture is symbolic because you can't criticize the authorities directly. "Everyone loved 'smash little bottle,' remember?"

"Little bottle" was a pun on Deng Xiaoping's name, so of course consumption of bottled drinks had risen dramatically in the past weeks. Side-stepping broken glass was now second nature to us. "This goat must allude to something important," I insisted.

Craig grunted, but followed the swath I cut toward the Monument to the People's Heroes. He'd been right; there was a greater concentration of students around the obelisk and their spirit was as high at midnight as it had been at noon.

Since Craig had the genetic advantage of being a full head taller than most of the spectators, he said, "Some kids are building something."

I stood on my tiptoes and wished I'd packed a pair of decadent high heels. I nevertheless managed to catch a glimpse of two wooden carts bearing a motley of large, white plaster forms.

Weaving between the carts was a long, straight horn jutting from an agitatedly bobbing head. The unflattering fluorescent light of a lamppost revealed dull, worn bone that ended in a jagged tip. Its tattered ears flickered, and I could've sworn that it had seen me with its rheumy eyes—

"Damn." I lost my balance and stumbled into Craig. When I regained it, the creature had disappeared. "It's gone again. Come on."

I grabbed his hand and towed all six feet plus of him to a ring of chattering students. "Does anyone speak English?" I asked.

They jabbered hotly with each other for a few minutes. I figured they were debating if I was an undercover cop posing as foreign media. I stood uncomfortably, shifting my weight back and forth between my feet. Just because I was used to people talking about me in Chinese didn't mean I liked it. *Goddamn it*, I told myself, *this isn't a family get-together*.

Craig stepped in and lowered his tinted glasses. "*Jia na da ren*," he said, artfully forming the Mandarin equivalent to "Canadian."

A skinny young man broke off from the group. "If someone ask, I give you directions to Kentucky Fried Chicken," he said. His pronunciation was surprisingly flawless, with the hint of a British accent; English must have been his government-assigned vocation.

I nodded, deciding not to point out that the restaurant was closed at this time of night. "Is someone keeping a goat around?" I asked.

He looked taken aback, as if he weren't sure that he'd heard me correctly. *Poor kid. He was probably prepared to give a grand speech about Freedom, Democracy and Human Rights.*

"A goat? With a long head and one horn?" I measured the creature's proportions with wide, sweeping hand motions. He looked even more puzzled.

"Here," I said, pulling a pen and notebook from my shoulder bag.

I was a writer because I had little visual sense, but there was no mistaking a single-horned beast even if drawn with shaky fingers. He took a drag of his cigarette and smiled condescendingly.

"Ah. *Zhi*. She is companion of Gao Yao, god of justice. Once she represent integrity of government." Laughter emerged as a harsh, bitter snort. "But now..."

Flicking ash onto the littered concrete, he continued, "But only peasants and old people believe in such things."

He looked scornfully at me as if I were an ignorant *gwai-lo*— "white ghost," or Caucasian. I indeed felt foolish for having seen a beast out of ancient mythology.

"No gods here. And only devils are you foreign ones." He jabbed his cigarette in Craig's direction. This time his laughter was genuinely amused.

A spontaneous cheer swept through the students like a tidal wave. Craig and I looked up toward the Monument to the People's Heroes. The plaster pieces had been assembled into a tall, robed woman holding a torch aloft with both hands.

"The Goddess of Democracy," the student shouted proudly over the din.

"Looks like the fuckin' Statue of Liberty," Craig muttered.

Turning back to us with a nicotine-stained grin, the student said, "*That* is god now. One we believe in. One we..." He paused, searching for the English words in his head. "One we have faith in. All others are no more." He flashed a V-for-victory sign for the benefit of Craig's camera, and then rejoined his friends.

He was right. The old gods were gone, chased away by the Cultural Revolution and exiled by China's official atheism. They'd probably fled to the New World, where they survived in little tabletop shrines in Chinatown eateries and in curio shop windows beside airbrushed busts of Elvis. Or perhaps they'd retired to Kunlun, their celestial paradise, where Xi Wang Mu served up her tri-millennial peaches of immortality.

No matter which it was, they had turned their eyes from the Middle Kingdom. Or, more accurately, the Middle Kingdom had stopped turning its eyes heavenward. In Beijing, the closest thing to an idol was Mao Zedong's portrait, which watched the square from the Gate of Heavenly Peace with the impassive eye of an Old Testament god.

But now the Great Helmsman had a challenger: a young upstart created by these idealistic kids.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR. YOU JUST MIGHT GET IT. A FORTUNE COOKIE cliché that proved to be appropriate for this humid June night.

A humid June night, waiting for the shit to hit the proverbial fan. Although it had been a few days since the students had erected their goddess in front of Mao's portrait, the government had taken little action against this bold challenge. As I sat in my room at the Beijing Hotel, carefully shredding my latest and most unsuccessful draft, a knock sounded on the door.

"Who is it?"

"Big Brother."

"Very funny, Craig," I said, letting him in.

"How's it going?"

I eyed him suspiciously. The last time we'd spoken, he'd been convinced that I was insane for having seen the *zhi*. Or at least delirious from some tropical disease. Mao Zedong's Revenge or something like that.

"Well?"

"Awful," I said, tossing the remains of an afternoon's work into a garbage can. "The story's going nowhere. I wish they'd kiss and make up soon. There's only so much I can write about 'smashing little bottles' and singing Cantonese pop songs around the Goddess of Democracy."

"Tell me about it," he growled, collapsing on the room's single chair. "No one's got the balls to fuckin' *act!* There should be tear gas, rubber bullets, people chaining themselves to the Monument to the People's Heroes. Instead they've got a bunch of kids sneaking juice and yogurt between glucose injections and flashing hundred-watt smiles at fuckin' CNN."

"You have to admit it's funny. Generations of conditioning, backfiring on the government. Did you know that children chant propaganda at school like 'The people love the army! The army loves the people!'"

"Crazy shit. No wonder the army hasn't entered the city yet. They must be confused as hell."

I craned my head toward the balcony, where the faint lights of the square were visible through the railing. "God," I sighed, "I just want to go home." Afraid that I'd undermined my image as a tough journalist in front of Craig, I added, "You know what really pisses me off?"

"What?"

"The magazine sent me here because I'm Chinese. Because my *parents* are Chinese. And even if I did speak the language, it wouldn't matter because my family speaks Cantonese, not Mandarin. But no, someone takes one look at my last name and decides that I'm perfect for this assignment."

"Nah, that's not true," Craig said. "You were sent 'cause you're a woman. Fuckin' equal opportunity."

I met his eyes—*they're so blue*, I thought enviously—and saw by the quirked crow's feet that he was joking. His stubbled face split into a grin.

"C'mon. I'll buy you a drink and you can prove to me that you can hold your liquor better than the Chinese girls I know."

“Ha. I can probably hold it better than Wendy Ng. Which isn’t saying much.”

I laughed as I grabbed my shoulder bag, but inside I bristled. *When we get back to Toronto, I’ll show him.* I’d curl my hair, pop on a pair of false eyelashes, slip on a miniskirt and show him that I was *nothing* like the Chinese girls he knew.

The hotel bar was full but strangely quiet. Everyone—tourists, foreign press, waiters, cooks—was clustered around a radio that someone had set up on a barstool.

“What’s going on?” asked Craig.

Wendy Ng shushed him without disturbing a single hair from her immaculately coiffured head. The voice on the radio spoke in the soft, subtle tones of Mandarin, and it took me a few minutes to realize that he was repeating the same message over and over.

Wendy turned white—*gwai-lo* white. “What are they saying?” I asked her.

The bar staff began chattering excitedly while the non-Chinese—and myself—stood, confused, waiting for someone to translate.

She finally spoke. “They’re saying that all citizens should stay out of the streets and the square tonight, to protect themselves.”

This was it. Craig and I exchanged high fives. “Shit,” he said with a cocky grin, “meet fan.”

Wendy looked shocked, but she was just another goody two-shoes Connie Chung wanna-be. And I wasn’t.

Tonight I was going to show them that I was a writer. A journalist. Not an Asian, an Oriental, nor a CBC—Canadian-born Chinese. Not a Nice Chinese Girl, a hollow Bamboo, a yellow-on-the-outside-white-on-the-inside Banana, nor any of the other ill-fitting labels with which I’d been plagued since birth. So I blew Wendy a kiss and followed Craig’s swagger out of the bar, feeling the adrenaline course through my veins.

THE WARNINGS MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN BROADCAST BY BLUEBEARD. OR whoever had told Pandora to keep that damned box closed. I had to smile; the knowledge they were as fatally curious as decadent Westerners would vex most Chinese.

“Locals carrying spoiled, pudgy Little Emperors, the result of China’s single-child policy, on their shoulders,” I said into my mini cassette recorder. “Taking photos of their kids—kid—in front of the Goddess of Democracy as if she really were an American tourist trap.”

Craig snorted, but I noted that he’d snuck in a few family-friendly snapshots himself. I turned my back to him and surveyed the square, trusting that he’d have the sense not to lose sight of me.

“Men and women taking pleasure strolls in shorts and sandals,” I continued. “Ubiquitous little old ladies with sunburned faces and bad posture watching over their grandchildren. Might as well be Sunday afternoon in the park, except this park looks like a post-apocalyptic squatters’ camp.”

“Hey,” Craig said, grabbing my arm, “Mike from the BBC told me

he saw armored personnel carriers in the east." His blue eyes were wild. "Looks like the army doesn't love the people after all. I'm gonna go check it out before Wendy Ng's camera crew beats me to it. Meet you back here in half an hour."

"Wait! Don't leave me—"

He melted into the crowd, his golden head bobbing above the sea of black hair like a buoy.

"—alone." I kicked aside an empty juice bottle and watched it roll until it stopped in a nest of dirty newspapers. I made a three-sixty; familiar yet foreign faces surrounded me wherever I looked. They too were waiting for the last act in this melodrama. At least we had that much in common, but I took little comfort in it.

A familiar bleat trumpeted high above the cacophony. I didn't care if I was hallucinating. I didn't care if I was ridiculed by natives and foreigners alike. I didn't care what anyone, including myself, thought; it was the one living creature who was as alien in this place as I was.

I pushed past an ambling middle-aged couple, following my ears. A knot of students cheerfully disbanded in front of me, enthused from what had sounded like a pep rally. There it was, about five meters ahead, crouching on the ground amidst cigarette butts and broken glass.

The *zhi*.

It—no, *she*, the student said it was female—seemed to be stuck, as if her front legs were mired in the concrete. I realized that she was bracing herself with what little strength she had, her distended belly resting on folded hind legs.

Dear God. She wasn't bloated from starvation.

She was pregnant.

And, judging from the distress in her broken, eardrum-rattling squeal and the dark puddle pooled around her hindquarters, she was in labor.

As I had difficulty squeezing through the tight clusters of students and spectators, I nearly believed they were watching the *zhi* as well until I followed a little girl's pointing finger toward a distant wall. A wall that appeared to be moving closer to us. A wall of tanks, rolling effortlessly over the students' makeshift barricades.

The *zhi* whimpered, and a round form tore through the dilated opening between her hind legs.

The tanks stopped about twenty feet away from the front line of the crowd.

A small, puckered shape eased slowly onto the ground in a globule of viscous fluid.

The people leaned forward in anticipation.

The *zhi* rose, feebly, and began licking her offspring's form.

The hatches popped open.

Two small, hairless legs unfolded, followed by two equally small *arms*.

A row of armed soldiers poured out.

The *zhi's* child was human: a tiny, wrinkled baby, its eyes and nose smeared with blood and mucus.

The people—men and women in casual summer clothes, students with megaphones, even stoop-shouldered grandmothers—began to yell. *The people love the army. The army loves the people.* No doubt that they believed the military had betrayed them.

The soldiers raised their rifles.

The *zhi* crumpled into a slick, bedraggled heap.

And then, even though the only demons in China were foreign *gwai-lo*, all hell broke loose nonetheless.

The first shots rang out, and the front line held up their jackets, shielding themselves from the assault of rubber bullets.

They weren't rubber.

The second shots rang out and all of a sudden I was carried away on a screaming, raging human tide. I had no choice but to wrench my gaze from the *zhi* and ride the wave. Run with the masses. Run, literally, for my life.

Shots sounded like thunder. People fell like dominoes—whether they were hit or simply diving for cover, I couldn't tell. Molotov cocktails appeared out of nowhere in the hands of young students. Soldiers who were foolish enough to stray from formation disappeared under swarms of furious citizens. The sky lit up, scorched with red and gold and the sickly yellow-green of fluorescent floodlights. The unholy trinity of smoke, blood and fire.

Someone behind me emitted a horrible choking sound from a wet, raw throat. The toppling body crashed into my legs. As I lurched forward, anticipating the scrape of concrete against my palms, a dark spot blossomed in the arched back of the girl in front of me.

In that horrifying second, I thought, *She could've been me it should've been me—*

"God have mercy," I cried.

But I remembered too late that the only god left in Beijing was Mao—and he had been dead thirteen years.

Concrete broke my fall but it was darkness who swallowed me in the end.

THE SMELL OF SULFUR AT FIRST, AND THEN THE ACRID BITE OF BLACK SMOKE. They singed my nostrils, nudging me into consciousness.

I wrenched open one stinging eye, and then the other. They revealed short, coarse, salt-and-pepper hair and weatherbeaten skin the color and texture of deep-fried tofu.

One of those ubiquitous little old Chinese ladies crouched above me. She wore a plum-colored Mao jacket and slacks that stopped above her ankles in spite of her diminutive height. I wondered, deliriously, what she had seen during her lifetime. Had she survived the Nanking holocaust? Joined Mao's Long March and helped him defeat Chiang Kai-shek? Had her children been turned against her during the Cultural Revolution? It seemed odd that her eyes were dry. Yet compared with this tumultuous history, tonight's bloodshed was just another notch on China's belt of

twentieth-century civil strife.

Child.

The voice resonated inside my throbbing head.

My poor, lost child. You called me—yet you do not know me?

For half a heartbeat, between the arrhythmic crackle of machine gun fire, her appearance flickered—

—a woman cradling a baby in her arms—

—a thousand-armed bodhisattva who blinked her thousand eyes at me—

—a richly dressed goddess bearing a willow branch and a vase—

—and then back to the wizened grandmother who crouched above me.

My mind fumbled with the unfamiliar syllables until it settled on the Mandarin translation of her name.

“Guanyin,” I said. Goddess of mercy, compassion. I’d been wrong; not all of the old gods had fled. She looked so goddamned old and tired. Anyone, however, would be tired if they were stretched thinly over millions of people, many of whom were too poor and illiterate to revive her worship. They had no reason to place faith in higher authority anyway, since they’d been failed before.

I rubbed my eyes with the back of a gritty hand. “I must be dreaming.”

What are gods but the dreams of people?

The old woman’s smile was heartbreakingly enigmatic.

“The *zhi*,” I suddenly remembered, propping myself on my elbows. They refused to bear my weight.

Dead.

“The child?”

In my care. She is weak, but will live as long as they have faith in her.

“Faith? What does that have to do with—” I followed the old woman’s gaze to the proud plaster figure of the Goddess of Democracy. *What are gods but the dreams of people?* “Oh. Oh my God.”

I thought the birth of gods was supposed to be spontaneous, I accused silently. *Immaculate.* Like Athena springing from Zeus’ forehead. The Goddess of Democracy’s birth, however, had been bloody and dirty and the *zhi* had died because of it.

One impossibility begetting another. But tonight was a night of impossibilities. The second the beloved People’s Liberation Army had raised their weapons, the world had irrevocably turned upside down. And I knew that mine had been turned upside down as well.

I grabbed at the old woman’s hand in another feeble attempt to climb to my feet—

—through a thousand compassionate eyes I saw waves of men and women falling as I extended a thousand arms that fell too short to reach them—

—and I collapsed, swearing in anger, frustration and helplessness. Craig would have been proud of the four-letter Anglo-Saxon words that spewed from my mouth. A massacre, that’s what it was. Backs arched. Faces seized into taut masks. Dark flowers of blood on sallow skin or sweat-soaked T-shirts. And then they crumpled, heads and limbs at odd angles. That was

it. It suited the stark poetry of journalism. But it didn't suit me.

"Can't you do anything?" I asked.

She shook her head sadly. Obviously mercy had been the farthest thing from the soldiers' minds when they fired at unarmed civilians.

Only this.

She touched my forehead and the darkness reclaimed me.

"HEY. HEY, WAKE UP."

A pair of baby blues came into focus in my field of vision. It was Craig. A day ago I would have been flattered that he'd found me, like a needle in a haystack. Now I was simply relieved. I lifted my head and saw that I was in front of the Beijing Hotel, and that I was not the only body lying in the street.

"You are the gutsiest bitch I've ever worked with, you know that?" he said, shaking his head with admiration. "You're damn lucky that someone dropped you off in front of the hotel."

He helped me to my feet. I winced. I was not looking forward to cataloging my bruises and scrapes. "One of those little old ladies in a pedicab," he continued. "I don't know how she got past the troops—they're blocking off the north end of the square—or how she knew to come here. Hell, she was probably getting tired and figured that someone in the hotel would be merciful enough to take you in."

"Guanyin," I said. I instinctively scanned the street for little old ladies, even though I knew she was gone.

"Huh? I thought you didn't speak Chinese."

"Never mind. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Although he'd seemingly escaped without a scratch, the brocaded strap around his neck ended in a tangle of metal and cracked lenses. "Oh, Craig," I said, "your camera."

"That's okay. I took the film out, thank God." He plucked a couple of canisters from his jeans pocket. "I got a great shot of the Goddess of Democracy. You've got to see it. It's in a million pieces."

"The Goddess—" I whispered.

It started as a tremor, a flutter in the pit of my stomach, and traveled to my shoulders, shaking them into submission.

"And in the background you can see Mao's portrait hanging from the Gate of Heavenly Peace. It'll make an awesome cover photo."

My head collapsed on my chest. Tears threatened to break the barrier of my lowered eyelashes. Damn. I hadn't cried in public since third grade, when the schoolyard bully had teased me because I didn't have retractable eyelids.

"Christ," Craig swore. "Are you actually *crying*? We knew this place was a time bomb—what the hell did you expect? Fuckin' *dim sum* with Deng Xiaoping? They were just a bunch of naive kids playing with matches and gasoline."

Shaking. I couldn't stop shaking. I thought of the blossoming entry

wound that had killed the girl in front of me. She'd been so young. And there were hundreds more like her. I thought about the people—*my* people—and the gods. The living and the dead, and those in between, like the child that had been born amidst blood and concrete.

"Jesus H. Christ," Craig said. "You know, I thought you were different, but you're just another goody two-shoes Nice Chinese Girl who wants to be the next Connie Chung."

I slapped a bloody, concrete-scarred hand over his mouth, which proverbially hurt me more than it hurt him.

"Shut the fuck up," I said.

He shut up.

"And yes," I said, "I am."

And then I cried.

ALTHOUGH IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN TEN YEARS, IT IS THE LITTLE THINGS that never let me forget the night I saw Tiananmen Square with a thousand eyes: incense rising from the corner of a Chinese restaurant; Asian cliques of University of Toronto students laughing and strolling through the downtown core; the ubiquitous little old Chinese ladies on the corner of Dundas and Spadina who sell green onions and bundles of sticky rice off of wooden crates. Occasionally one of those little old ladies will push past me with her shuffling yet purposeful walk, towing a plump girl-child in parka and mittens by the hand. Sometimes she catches my eye, and I know that the *zhi's* child is safe.

And I smile because it reminds me of China's so-called Little Emperors, the spoiled younger generation. The *zhi's* child will be the emperor among emperors, pampered and indulged by its elders until it is ready to come into its own.

Then its demands will be hard to ignore. ♣

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The Blue, Blue Grass of Home

Gary Archambault

IT WAS JIM WHO GOT THE IDEA OF DYEING THEM all blue, the hilly lawns surrounding Newbrook Manor.

“When it’s windy,” he said, “the grass will ripple like a big ocean.”

“It wouldn’t be good for the grass,” I said.

“Oh, I’m sure there’s a safe way of doing it.”

“Management won’t go for it. They’ll think it’s nuts.”

Jim looked contemptuously at his Rothman’s, as if it were somehow forcing him to smoke it. “They’re nuts and this whole place is nuts.” He massaged a kink in his neck. “Dyeing the grass blue would be *good* nuts, uplifting nuts, magical nuts, ceremonial healing nuts.”

It was our mid-afternoon break and we sat on one of the picnic tables none of the residents used, it being too hard on their behinds. Having switched from regular to extra-light, I now smoked two packs a day instead of one. Using Jim’s snake lighter (you had to hold it sideways for the flame to shoot from the snake’s mouth), I lit up another extra-light and sucked twice as hard as I would have on a regular.

“Dye the grass blue, and then what?”

“Then they can look out their windows and see something strange and wonderful. Hills transformed into oceanic blueness.”

Jim got a book of poetry published once. *The Urban Blandscape*, it was called. So he sometimes talked like a poet. “You have to do something working at a place like this,” he said. “Or you go bad nuts inside.”

Changing their diapers, massaging the oncoming rigor mortis from their atrophied muscles, hearing them cry because nobody visited them—that was hard, but that wasn’t what Jim meant. What was hard was seeing how many drugs got shoved down their throats. Pain killers, nerve pills, anti-

depressants, anti-anxiety pills, and not mild ones, no; not a resident in the place had been straight since the day they'd arrived.

"You know why we get twenty bucks an hour?" asked Jim. "Ten to do our job, and ten to keep our mouths shut about what we see."

"It's no different anywhere else."

The breeze caught Jim's long black hair and it fluttered like a shredded black flag. If you hung around Jim long enough, you started to catch his "disease," as he called it. His poetry disease.

He pocketed his snake lighter. "We better get back in."

AS WE HAD NO LEVEL-TWO TRAINING, WE WERE TECHNICALLY NOT SUPPOSED TO help residents onto the commode, move them from their beds into their wheelchairs, clip their toenails, or put dry-skin creams on them. But we did; and everything else we did we weren't legally supposed to do. Level Twos got thirty to thirty-five bucks an hour, however, and so, according to management, the rules didn't matter.

"I miss how rugs feel as they squish between your toes," said Mrs. Haswell as I put some salve on her bedsores. "And especially sand. The way sand feels when you walk on it."

"Maybe there'll be an out-trip to the beach soon." I knew there never would be, but I said it anyway.

"I fell asleep on the beach once. Lord, I think Jack Kennedy was president then. Anyhow, I got second-degree burns all over me." She chuckled rasply. "I never did *that* again."

She looked up at me. She was an encyclopedia of experience. Open her to any random page and you'd find something worth reading. "They leave me in bed too often," she said. "That's why I have—"

"I'll tell them, Mrs. Haswell." Which I would and yet nothing would be done about it.

"It hurts to sit in my wheelchair, which makes me stay in bed more often, which gives me more sores."

There was not a hint of complaint in her inflection, and I wondered if that was a sign of her character, or medication. "Even if it hurts," I said, "you should get up and around more often. Socialize. It'll get your blood flowing."

A motivational speaker I wasn't. That the baby in my wife's belly would someday be able to see me for what I was—never for more than two or three minutes did it leave my mind.

"That should do it for now," I said. "How about I help you in your chair and bring you down to the dayroom?"

"Oh, they have that TV so darn loud."

"Not everybody can hear as well as you."

"Every other commercial is about tampons."

I covered up her back and moved her to her side. "If you need me, just buzz."

JIM AND I WOULD STOP FOR A BEER AT THE JOLLY ABOUT EVERY SHIFT-END now, when we were on days.

“It must be kicking like a little stallion by now, eh?”

I smiled. “Pam says she expects to wake up one morning and find that he’s kicked a hole right through her stomach.”

Jim half-laughed and half-exhaled some smoke. “So what are you going to call him?”

“Actually, we don’t know if it’s a he or a she. I read that ultrasounds aren’t all that safe, not as safe as we’re supposed to believe they are anyway.”

He nodded. “It good you not trust doctors.” For some reason, half a beer and he went into Indian-speak. “You trust doctor, and you end up dead.”

Then, in a conspiratorial whisper, he said, “Me get blue dye. We make grass like ocean.”

“Jim.” I reached for my thirtieth extra-light that day. “They’ll know it was you.” Getting a drag off an extra-light was almost impossible. “I think they lost their sense of humor after the powwow incident by the shuffleboard courts.”

“They speak truth. People in circle speak truth they need to—how white people say? *Get off chest.*”

I remembered how aghast Angela and Joel from management had looked as they came running out of Newbrook Manor, having seen what was going on out their office windows.

“They were sobbing and wailing, Jim. The residents were sobbing and wailing. You could probably hear it five miles away.”

“Crying good medicine. Not crying make poisons, and poisons make mind go funny.”

“But...” I took a gulp of beer. He was right. The powwow had been a great idea. But... “They’ll know it was you and you’ll lose your job.”

“Me not care about job.” He watched a young lady with an exceptional behind pass our table. “Me have to follow little voice inside.”

“But what’ll it prove?”

“Me not have to prove dick. Me make magic.”

I took a good hard suck on my extra-light and got almost nothing out of it. Jim, looking serious as a shotgun shoved in your face, as he always did, pushed his pack of Rothman’s towards me. I reminded myself that I had promised Pam I’d quit by the time the baby was born.

“Me need more beer,” I said.

“I DON’T KNOW,” SAID PAM. “I LIKE JIM BUT...HE’S SO INTENSE. THAT TIME I met him, I thought at first that he was flirting with me, the way he would stare into my eyes, but then I realized that that was just his way.” She held her belly as though it might fall off. I tried to understand why pregnant women found themselves unattractive, and couldn’t. I found Pam with her big bulbous belly as beautiful as anything.

“That was a strange night,” said Pam, “the night I met Jim. After I talked with him for about—I don’t know, only about a minute, he said to me, “You more there than anybody I meet in long time,” and he said it so, like, seriously. Like he was baptizing me or something.”

I laughed. “Yeah, Jim’s an odd one, that’s for sure.”

“You don’t think he really has...?”

"Powers?" I said it nice and deadpan, kind of like how Mulder would on *The X-Files*.

"Yeah."

"We got pro-lifers shooting pro-choicers, Gulf War vets fathering babies with flippers not to mention organs that have to be stuffed back inside them, false memory fanatics claiming that people have no reason to forget awful shit that happened to them, so...I don't know. That somebody we know has unusual powers—there's not exactly a big leap of faith involved in believing that, is there?"

Pam smiled. "It's just that we're going to be parents soon and I..."

"Want to be normal."

"Yes."

"Normal spelled backwards is Lamron, who, other than being tens of thousands of years old, speaks to me—or *through* me, I should say—late at night, about how if we only stopped to smell the roses more often—"

"Stop it. Now you're just being silly."

"I can't get over how much larger your breasts are getting."

Pam softly shook her head. "I can't get over how much smaller your brain is getting."

"No brain, no pain."

"In accordance to that dictum, in about a month I'll be a fully-fledged bona fide genius."

"Dictum? Who the hell ever uses *dictum* in an ordinary, Just Sitting At The Kitchen Table kind of conversation?"

She pushed herself up from her chair. "There's a dirty joke in there somewhere, but instead of looking for it, I think I'll have a banana, pickle, and grape jam sandwich. Want one?"

"I won't even answer that."

"WHAT IF IT RAINS?"

"Does the rain wash out dye from people's hair?"

"You're going to use hair dye?"

"I didn't say that."

Jim buffed the hallway floor while I removed old news from the Activity Board. "Maybe I won't use dye at all," said Jim. "Maybe I'll use something else."

"Maybe you'll lose your job and end up with a pay check half of what you're getting now."

"Maybe you live with one foot in the past and one foot in the future and none in the present tense." He swirled the buffer gracefully over the hospital-like floor. "You white people are all like that."

"Wisdom has nothing to do with the color of your skin, Jim."

"I didn't say it does."

"You implied it, and I hate that." I'd finished clearing the Activity Board and should have been doing something about the mysterious smell in Mr. Taylor's room. "Women implying that men are all ruled by their penises and intuitively challenged, black people implying that whitey's got no soul, Indians implying that they're all more tuned into nature than thou."

I hate that.”

“I’m not an Indian now. I’m a Native American.” He smiled. “Call me Indian and me scalp you with tomahawk.”

“What do you think the smell in Mr. Taylor’s room is? They tell me to do something about it, yet they don’t even know where it’s coming from.”

In his hands the buffer swirled like some strange electronic divining rod. “My guess—” Someone in a nearby room started crying. “—is it’s the smell of someone about to die.”

I went to see what the crying was about, knowing that Jim was probably right. I’d noticed that smell in both Mrs. Williamson’s room and Mr. House’s room not long before they’d passed on. But that wasn’t what the management wanted to hear. Or maybe it was. An empty room meant some family willing to pay even more than the previous occupant’s family.

For a room for grandma or grandpa to rot away and die in.

“I CAN’T READ,” SAID MRS. TREVELYAN. “I TRY BUT...THE WORDS GO ALL SPUGGY.”

“I don’t follow you. What does *spuggy* mean?”

“I don’t know.” Having dropped to a hundred pounds in the last few months, Mrs. Trevelyan was hardly even there. “What *does* spuggy mean?”

For Newbrook Manor, such exchanges were not an exceedingly uncommon phenomena.

“I don’t know what it means, and it doesn’t matter. What matters is why you were crying.”

“Because I can’t read anymore.” She was so thin, like a stick person with some wrinkled skin pasted on. “It’s the Xanax, I keep telling them. But the nurses say I might die if I don’t take it. That my anxiety makes my hypertension worse. But I think I’d *rather* die if I can’t even read a book. What else is there to do in here?”

“Did you ask the nurse if there was something else they could give you? Something that wouldn’t impair your concentration quite so much?”

“Oh, they don’t listen to you.” She got the same conspiratorial look in her eyes that Jim often did. “Sometimes I can’t even remember what I did the day before.”

The doctors would file that under S for senility not side effects.

“Have the pills they gave you for your appetite been working?” It was a stupid question. They obviously hadn’t been.

“I can’t even remember what half the pills I take are for.”

Joel appeared in the doorway. “Is there a problem here?”

“Mrs. Trevelyan is upset because she’s having a problem reading.”

“The optometrist will be in on Friday.” He looked over at the bag of bones in her almost equally skinny bed. “That’s only two days away, Mrs. Trevelyan.”

“It’s not my eyes and I’m not having a *problem* reading. I *can’t* read.”

“Something she’s on makes the words go all...well, Mrs. Trevelyan just can’t read,” I tell Joel, who— (“Referring to management and staff by their first names will inculcate a feeling of trust, and residents by their surnames

a feeling of respect," said one of the training pamphlets.)

—gave me his famous You're Not A Doctor look, and then asked (ordered, in other words) me to come confer with him in his office about something.

"JOEL THREATENED TO FIRE ME," I SAID.

Jim was halfway through an apple. "On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that I dared to imply that drugging the residents into a stupor is perhaps not a good thing."

As he chewed, he worked on the kink he'd had in his neck for as long as I could remember. "You need to help me," he said. "You eat shit too long and you start to smell like shit."

"Help you?"

"Help me make the fields quiver like lake caressed by the breath of The Great Spirit."

"They already do. Like a green lake."

"They'll look out their windows and see that the world is not what they are told it is."

"They'll look out their windows and see that some madman has dyed the grass blue."

He looked at his now two-thirds eaten apple. "Your wife filled with life itself, and yet you have no sense of mystery. Like, where does soul come from? Why you and Pam have baby and some people can't?"

"Stop doing your Indian-speak. It gets annoying."

"I speak however I want to. Not like machine, like you do. I hear you in their rooms. The more you work here, the more you sound like *them*: the people you think you are better than."

"Are you implying that I'm no better than the management?"

"Me imply nothing. Nor state nothing. Truth can't be stated, only conveyed."

"What's the difference between implying something and conveying something?"

"By caging words on paper, you make words as flat and dead as paper. We couldn't understand that, white man's obsession with putting words down on paper, as if white man afraid of forgetting what he is thinking."

I tried my best to enjoy the wonderful lunch Pam made me. "Jim, sometimes I think that you are a genuine lunatic."

He laughed and rose from the picnic bench and threw his apple core up into the sky. "See? Apple core not come down."

And it didn't. Not that I saw.

That afternoon, as I hosed down the shuffleboard courts, I kept an eye out for Jim's apple core but I didn't see it anywhere.

"THE SUN WAS IN MY EYES," I SAID TO PAM.

"I kind of like *his* version of it." She was chopping up some green peppers for a stir fry. "If only we could throw *all* our garbage up at the sky and not have it fall back down on us."

"Maybe it only works with biodegradables."

“The Great Compostor In The Sky.”

I wanted to tell her about Jim’s plan to dye the grass around Newbrook Manor blue, and yet something stopped me. It just didn’t feel right somehow.

“What tribe is Jim anyway?” She glanced over at me.

“Tribe? I’m not sure if that’s the right word to use these days. I’ll have to consult our *Miss Manners’ Guide To Proper Linguistic Etiquette*.”

“I hope it’s not one of the ones they turned into a car name. There’s something so...I don’t know...*sad* about that.”

“I’ll invite him over for dinner. Then you can spring the big question. *Jim, what tribe are you?*”

Pam turned away from the counter, pulled her shirt up over her belly, aimed her bulbousness at me, and said, “The baby’s giving you the finger.”

During dinner, we decided that we *would* have Jim over. Not to ask him what tribe he was, though.

“REALLY? AT YOUR PLACE? JUST YOU, PAM AND ME?” JIM LOOKED STRANGELY touched, as if we’d just offered to donate one of our kidneys or something.

“On Friday.”

“That’s tomorrow.”

“Right.”

He’d pulled out the half-sized fridge in the kitchen off the dayroom. Maintenance was another job that we, strictly speaking, were not supposed to do. “I insult you,” he said, “make fun of you, tell you that you understand nothing, and yet...yet you invite me to your home.”

“What’s with the fridge?” I wanted to change the subject.

“It not work.” He looked at the back of the fridge as if it were from outer space.

“Maybe it’s just a fuse.”

MR. AMERY, WHO WORE NOTHING BUT PAJAMAS, AS THOUGH IN CONSTANT expectation of the big sleep, approached as I headed for the fuse box. “They think they know what we think, but they don’t,” he said. “They can’t, at least not with me. Because I trained myself how to think in colors that aren’t even on the spectrum.”

His gaze was two parts spaciness, one part something only Jim could describe. “This noggin of mine ain’t as rusty as they think it is.” He stood too close to me, as though I wouldn’t even notice him unless he did. “I didn’t spend fourteen months in Korea for nothing, you know. If you spent a few days having to bag and tag bodies, you’d learn how to train your mind too, you would. If you don’t, they’ll suck every thought you ever had right out of your head.”

I wondered if he were that crazy before he came to Newbrook Manor.

“And what’s a person without his own thoughts?” He looked at me as if I were personally responsible for every bad thing that had ever happened to him. “I’ll tell you what he is. A garbage can, that’s what he is. A garbage can for any old crud people want to dump into him.”

Half of me wanted to tell him that I had a job to do, that Jim was waiting for me to see if a fuse had burned out, while half of me thought of how someday my child would look at me and see who I really was.

"In colors." Mr. Amery tapped the side of his head. "In colors that people like you can't steal because you don't even know they're there."

I tried to tell him with my eyes that I kind of understood.

He ambled off, leaving behind a smell of excrement, old age, and cheap cologne. In pajamas that got washed about once a week at most.

FRIDAY MORNING.

As soon as I entered the Visiting Lobby, as it was called, which was where I entered every morning, I knew that there was something wrong. I went to the Nurses Station to see what was up.

Nurse Braystone, who, although I had nothing to base it on, I suspected of hating her parents and taking it out on all the residents, glanced somewhat frostily up from her clipboard. "Mr. Taylor died of not waking up," she said. "His room will have to be cleaned. Today, that is."

Later that day I had to get some more cream for Mrs. Haswell's bedsores and, with only the thought of my expectant wife and our nine-tenths finished baby room stopping me from doing something horrible, I had to wait as a pharmaceutical company representative explained the use of all the free samples he was dropping off. In a kind of fog, I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Do you ever wonder what it does to the water?" I asked him, not quite focusing enough to make out his face. "All the drugs they piss out of them which end up in the oceans which end up back in *our* insides. Do you ever wonder what it might be doing to us? To them? To our children?"

As though he had some kind of subversive-thought detector, Joel appeared, took me by the arm, and said, "I understand that you and Mr. Taylor were friends. Why don't you take the rest of the day off." He smiled and I wanted to rip it off his skull, that oily, unreal smile of his. "With pay, of course,"

Now that I look back on it, I think every one of them—Nurse Braystone, Joel, Angela (who disliked old people so intensely she rarely emerged from her office) and all the rest of them—sensed that something was about to happen. Something big.

I TOOK A NAP TO SLEEP OFF THE THREE BEERS AND TWO SHOTS OF JACK DANIELS I had before heading home.

You got fired, said Pam's eyes when I got home early.

"Mr. Taylor," I said. "The one who lost not one, not two, but all three of his sons in Vietnam. He died, and they told me to go home early because...I don't know. Oh yeah, his only other kid, his daughter, Linda, I think her name was, got shot in the head because she didn't hand the bank till over fast enough. And let's not forget about his wife, whatever her name was, who spent six years dying of cancer."

Pam tucked me in and went to get started on whatever fancy dinner she was planning for when Jim came over.

I fell asleep quickly, and dreamt that I woke up and went to get a glass of water and watched with an odd, weary indifference as the faucet spat out what looked like puke. Then, still wanting a glass of cold, clean water, I went down to the kitchen and found that, right on the kitchen floor, Pam had given birth to what appeared to be an adult-sized human heart.

"I don't care," she said. "I still love it."

She held it up to her breast, as though it wanted to nurse.

I awoke with a skudgy, acidic taste in my mouth, and went out onto the little balcony outside our bedroom to smoke one of the regular-strength cigarettes from the pack I'd bought on my way home.

Jim arrived in a cab a few minutes after six. I hadn't thought of offering to go pick him up.

Lacking a dining room, Pam had strived to make the kitchen as dining room-like as possible: a maroon table cloth hid our scarred, stained kitchen table, neatly folded napkins still toasty from the dryer, mock elegant dinnerware we'd scored at some garage sale.

Jim seemed edgy, self-conscious; it hit me that people being nice to him for no reason at all was probably not a common occurrence in his life. I asked if he wanted a glass of wine. Pam had insisted on wine, saying in that half-facetious, half-sarcastic way of hers that only troglodytes would "ruin an extravagant feast of Sole Almandine, broccoli au gratin, good ol' mashed potatoes, my super original Waldorf-ish, heavy on the ish, salad and homemade peach cake, yes, the same kind you once insisted I make at one o'clock in the morning, for dessert by drinking that elixir of armpit stink: *beer*." The word *troglydyte* set me off on a tangent about how the original version of "Wild Thing" by The Troggs was far superior to the version by Jimi Hendrix, a tangent that ended with me jaggedly banging out the classic D-A-E-A chord progression on my fifty-dollar used acoustic right as Jim banged on the door.

"Wine," said Jim as I uncorked the bottle. "The person who called himself my father drank wine. In fact, that's all he did."

"You want some or what?"

Pam disapproved of my behavior without moving a muscle on her face, then looked at Jim. "The person who called himself your father?"

Jim wore one of those cowboy shirts you see people who are into line-dancing wear. "People aren't always what they say they are."

"Indian Jim, knower of dark truths." At last the cork came out, leaving only a few crumbs of it in the wine.

Pam, after yet another disapproving glance, leaned over for a peek at the fish in the oven; the broccoli au gratin was cooling down a bit in a glass pan on the stove, beside the potatoes.

"So," she said, awkwardly getting herself upright again. "You got a book of poetry published, didn't you? You write lots of poetry?"

Jim shrugged. "It not a big deal. Just words on paper. Anybody can put words on paper." He shook his head as I gestured towards the wine glass by his plate. "The trick is to write poems without words or paper."

He smiled. "One way is to make baby."

I filled up my glass. "All this wine for me?"

Pam looked down at her belly. "I never thought of it like that. That I have a poem growing inside me."

"Another way—" Jim looked at me. "—is to change something into something else."

Something in his eyes told me that tonight was going to be the night. That there was going to be more involved in driving him home than simply driving him home. And that it was most likely going to involve some kind of blue dye. Halfway through the wine and two-thirds of the way through dinner, as Pam was off using the washroom, Jim said to me, "We do it tonight. But no more wine or it won't work."

"You haven't had any wine."

"No more for *you*, paleface." He reached for some more potatoes. "Have cup of coffee after dinner."

THE NIGHT SKY WAS AS BLACK AS NIETZSCHE'S SHOES. WE WERE PARKED ABOUT half a mile from Newbrook Manor, and I felt like an idiot.

We stood beside the car. There was a faint smell of insecticide in the air. Jim had left it outside our house, stashed in some bushes: a canvas bag filled with God knew what. It now sat on the car roof.

"We must breathe together," said Jim. "That what word *conspiracy* mean. To breathe together."

"Weird." I was glad Jim hadn't let me finish the bottle of wine, as Pam had also been.

As we synchronized our breathing, Jim told me to do what he did. "Except for singing."

He tilted his head slowly back, breathing slower and slower, deeper and deeper. I squelched the urge to make a Simon Says joke, and did what he did.

Minutes passed. I felt a strange vibrating in my body and told myself not to be scared, that quite possibly I was simply humoring a friend suffering from some kind of serious mental illness. Suddenly Jim started to sing.

It was the howl of wolves mixed with the woeful, eerie moan of whales. It was van Gogh's *Starry Night* and the entire works of William Blake mixed together and translated into a song. It was those certain notes only Hendrix could hit, and the quiet sobbing of a child digging through the wreckage of a bomb-devastated village, looking for his parents. It was the sound of Dali's melting clocks, of Poe awaking to find himself in a lonely, locked coffin, of a world filled with war but no warriors.

My eyes were on fire, and my toes screamed, and I was a lame deer in a tank made of lies. His voice was the wind and it wailed that the clouds smelled of gasoline, that it was not blood but pain that ran through our veins, that unless we sang ourselves into being we were dead. The sounds rising up from deep within him were frightening and beautiful and I feared that at any minute I would shit my pants.

He became silent, and seized the canvas bag, a glint in his eyes the average person on the street would have seen as psychotic. I felt as though I were on some powerful drug, and yet I was perfectly, perfectly clear, aflame with clarity itself.

We strode towards Newbrook Manor, drinking huge lungfuls of night air. I had never felt so sure of anything in all my life.

I expected what was in the bag to be blue, but it wasn't. It was an earthy brown.

As we threw handfuls of it onto the grass, Jim softly chanted something in a language I'd never heard.

Newbrook Manor looked abandoned, unalive.

I would have been content to throw handfuls of the whatever-it-was onto the scraggy, hilly fields for the rest of eternity.

As we crept back to the car like mad executioners of everything unholy, we laughed quietly.

When we pulled in front of where Jim lived, he said, "Without each other, we are nothing."

Pam awoke as I crawled into bed. There was nothing as beautiful as a half-asleep pregnant woman's face. While we made love, slowly and very gently, I thought of how Jim had once said that our bodies are made of stars. And, unlike before, that made sense to me.

NOTHING WAS DIFFERENT. I WALKED CLOSER TO THE EDGE OF THE PARKING lot.

The grass was still green.

Jim, who I'd picked up on my way to work, lingered by the car. "Maybe only *they* see it as different," he said.

I glanced up at some of the windows and saw not a single face peering astonishedly out. After last night, I decided that it would be best to just trust Jim.

We headed inside to change into our work clothes.

AFTER BREAKFAST, THERE WOULD BE A BRIEF EULOGY FOR MR. TAYLOR. A funeral would cost money, and every cent in Mr. Taylor's bank account now belonged to Newbrook Manor. The faceless owners, that is.

I helped Reverend Wilson get the chapel room ready; it had been used for a birthday party a few days back and nobody had cleaned it up.

Reverend Wilson, who usually only came in for an hour or so on Sundays, looked vaguely spooked. As if he sensed that something odd was going down.

"You ever wonder if you'll end up in a place like this?" I asked him. There was a dismissiveness in his manner that made me want to screw with his head.

He replied coldly, "Reverends don't end up in old age homes."

I piled cake plates onto a plastic tray I'd gotten from the kitchen. "Why's that?"

He looked at me as if I were something other than human. "Because God takes care of his own."

I tried real hard to forget how sharp and pointy knives and forks could be. "As opposed to..." I gestured in the direction of all the rooms upstairs.

He flipped through his Bible. "That wasn't what I was implying at all."

“Oh.”

I left the chapel thinking, *And this is who will be sending Mr. Taylor off into the great unknown.*

BY LUNCH BREAK, I WAS ABOUT TWO-THIRDS CONVINCED THAT ALL LAST NIGHT had meant was that Jim had slipped something into one of my glasses of wine.

Not a bloody thing had happened yet. No residents exclaiming, “Look, look, we’ve floated off into the ocean!” Not even, “Everybody look, the grass has turned blue!”

Jim was already at the picnic bench. “Nice day outside,” he said.

I nodded and opened my lunch. “So...” I tried to unpeel my orange as calmly as possible. “Uh, what in the fuck’s name’s going on?”

He yawned. Stretched. Looked at his peanut butter sandwich as if unsure as to whether he should eat it or make it vanish into the sky. “White man no good at waiting. White man want everything all at once.”

I shoved an eighth of orange into my face.

“No wonder white man wreck planet. He can’t wait for things to grow like in garden.”

I tried to remember how good I felt last night.

“But...for white man, you okay guy. Must be to have such nice wife. Not all women have eyes that sing.”

Some of the tension all through me eased. “How come nobody—”

“Wait.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “White man no good at just doing nothing. Have to be busy, busy, busy. Busy making big busy-nesses to wreck planet even faster.”

“Spare me the—”

“Me very serious. Do nothing and it will happen. It not happen yet because you all anxious.”

AS I HELPED MRS. HASWELL ONTO THE COMMODORE, I HEARD SOMEBODY scream. “Oh my,” she said. “What on earth could that be?”

I almost went insane having to wait for her to finish. Half of me wanted to leave her there, but half of me thought of the child growing inside Pam.

By the time I got to the dayroom, which was where the scream had originated, Nurse Braystone was telling everybody to calm down.

Jim stood by the TV, as still as a totem pole.

Residents clustered by the dayroom window.

Joel, staring at me as if it were somehow all my fault, pulled a plastic container from his pocket, unscrewed it, and popped something into his mouth.

“They jumped out of their windows and—”

“Into the grass. They disappeared right into the—”

“It was blue. For a moment the fields were—”

“Everybody just calm down!”

“BUT WHERE ARE THEY?”

“It *was* water! I saw it!”

“Now there has to be a logical—”

“First one, and then another, and—”

“Oh, Mother of fucking Mercy,” said Joel as—

“What the fuck is—” Angela began, having just appeared, and—

“See!” screamed Mr. Amery. “If they hadn’t had their thoughts sucked—”

But even he became lost for words as he saw what we all saw:

Someone falling headfirst into the grass, which for a split second turned blue, and—

Vanishing.

Into the earth, or ocean, or whatever the fuck it was.

I looked over at Jim. People were yelling feebly from their rooms upstairs. “What is going on down there?” Nurse Braystone fell into a chair, whimpering, “I need some water. Somebody get me some—”

“There’s some outside,” said Mr. Amery, winked at me, and ran outside and—

Into the momentary blueness he went.

Again, I looked at Jim, who, from the look on his face, knew that this was going to happen.

“Where the fuck have they gone?” I yelled at him, and he smiled, and I was finding it hard to breathe, very, very hard to breathe, and—

“Where they wanted to,” he said and—

Calmly went upstairs to throw out the window whoever wanted to be thrown out the window.

Which they all did. Every one of them.

“Goodbye,” said Mrs. Haswell as I watched from her doorway. In all my time at Newbrook Manor, I had never seen her look so sure of anything. I tried to smile but couldn’t, and then out the window Jim threw her. Down into the blue, blue grass of home.

All I remember next is getting in my car and driving and driving until it all seemed like a dream, which it wasn’t, but I had to keep telling myself it had been. For a few hours, anyway.

At a roadhouse over a hundred miles away from Newbrook Manor, after a handful of beers and a few shots of Jack Daniels I phoned Pam and said, “Jim is insane. Stark raving nutfucko insane.”

And then, as best I could, I told her what had happened, leaving out the part about last night, about how I had helped it come to be.

My son is now three and a half and I still haven’t told her. But I will. Someday.

Jim appeared at my door just yesterday, which made me think of all this, and, only because Pam and Joey were at Pam’s mother’s place, I let him in.

And, as we sat and talked, I realized that right and wrong and good and evil and love and hate and life and death are just words. Stupid, grandiose words smeared by anxious hands all over the poetry of who we really are, making it hard to see each other, or touch each other, or even know each other, or—

Feel much of anything but afraid. Horribly afraid. ♣

About our contributors

GARY ARCHAMBAULT lives in Trenton, Ontario, and has had stories in *The Silver Web*, *Pulp-house* and, in Canada, *Descant*. His story "Falling Awake to the Here in Now Brightly" received an Honorable Mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* 1997. He is currently trying to get a novel called *Eleven* published about the prostitution of children, and has stories in the free ezines www.mindkites.com and www.3ampublishing.com.

Author's note: A while back my wife worked for Paramed, an organization that helps the elderly, and many times she came home in tears from seeing people alone, completely isolated, and on eight, nine, ten different kinds of medication. I started reading about the elderly and stumbled into a nightmare world of systemic abuse of the elderly. Poverty, being drugged into complacency, electroshock (ECT), run-for-profit "retirement centres." Dostoevsky said that you can judge a society by how its prisoners are treated. If being in a chemical haze all day with nothing to do but watch Jerry Springer isn't imprisonment, I don't know what is.

JAMES BEVERIDGE resides in Edmonton, Alberta and has been instigating aesthetic visual mayhem since childhood. He works with pencil, pen, brush, airbrush and his favorite, the pixel-pushing stylus. His last major project was doing backgrounds for cutscenes and package design for Prelusion (in Sweden) on the game *Gilbert Goodmate* (www.gilbertgoodmate.com). Still airbrushing as a general revenue-maker, he is working on expanding his digital universe.

E.L. CHEN is also an artist, which means she's pretty much screwed unless she marries rich. This is her third appearance in *On Spec*. Everything else that she doesn't mind you knowing can be found at www.geocities.com/elchensite.

Author's note: My first instinct was to produce the standard chinoiserie, which would be indistinguishable from any high fantasy tale if stripped of its Oriental elements. But this story could have only happened in Beijing on June 4, 1989, a place and time alien to most of us. My last name may give the story credibility, but like the narrator, I'm an impostor—a CBC who speaks English only. I had to do my research like anyone else.

LENA DETAR is currently studying Anthropology and Biology at Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, USA. She is a multiple runner-up for the Isaac Asimov Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Science Fiction and Fantasy. She plans to continue writing, and to go to Medical School on the side. She is deeply indebted to Vaughn's cowboy poetry collection for the synthesis of this story.

Author's note: "Trickster's Lot" was inspired by a cowboy poetry poem written by one Vaughn and read to me by another. My field studies in Anthropology have been focused around the cultures of the Southwest US, and this story draws heavily on a mix of mythology from present day Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo beliefs. The artist Everett Ruess is a historical figure shrouded in the same mythic mist; he disappeared without a trace from a box canyon in the early 1920s. The southwest is a large part Indian Reservation, often called the "3rd World" of the U.S., and is often overlooked in mainstream American culture.

MATTHEW JOHNSON is a writer and teacher who lives where the work is. This is his first professional fiction sale, though he has done plays, comics and TV work for various companies that went out of business before any of it could reach the public. He has just finished rewriting his first science fiction novel, *Fall From Earth*.

Author's note: I was first exposed to Chinese history nearly twenty years after I first ate Chinese food, but in each case I went away hungry for more. In the years since that first Chinese history course at Concordia I've kept studying Chinese and other East Asian cultures, and have learned enough to know that I could never write something set in the

“real” China and get all the details right. Instead I did what I do with most of my writing, created a culture based on a mix of real places and my own inventions. For the food in the story I used mostly authentic Taiwanese dishes, with the main exception of Nep Gao’s Temple Style Duck, which remains his secret.

JARRET KEENE teaches at Florida State University, where he also serves as editor of *Sundog: The Southeast Review*. He has a story forthcoming in the horror anthology *Dark Testament*. “Conjure Me” is his first professional publication.

Author’s note: “Conjure Me” grew out of a visit to the New Orleans Pharmacy Museum in the French Quarter a couple of years ago. Peering into the display cases in the ancient building, I was fascinated and horrified by the gruesome yet humane instruments and potions used to cure people of all kinds of afflictions. The history of pharmacies in New Orleans is unique because of the blend of Voodoo and Catholicism that infused pharmacists’ practices. I wanted to write a story that reflected the historical context of pharmacology and medicine during the Yellow Fever epidemic and explore the bounds of race, vice, power, and love during that time.

CATHERINE MACLEOD wrote her first postcard during a case of writer’s block, in the hopes that trying something new would get her started again. Blocked or not, she knew she could write 150 words. What she didn’t know was that writing postcards would become a happy addiction. She enjoys the challenge of working within strict guidelines, and thinks her postcards might please her first journalism teacher, who said, “Just tell the story and shut up.”

Author’s note: What I love most about myths is that no matter how old they are, where they originate, or how fantastic their trappings, they have their roots in plain old common sense. The Australian legend of the kundela, a method of execution that rarely fails, reminds us that nothing’s as dangerous as our own fears. The Minotaur is the monster we know is lurking out there, waiting for a single misstep. Perhaps, then, the one word of counsel all legends offer is, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

VERA NAZARIAN immigrated from the former Soviet Union to the West at the age of nine, and has sold numerous short works in the English language to magazines and anthologies. Her story “Rossia Moya” was on SFWA’s Preliminary Nebula Ballot for 2000, and received an Honorable Mention from Gardner Dozois in *Year’s Best SF* Vol. 17. Her debut fantasy novel *Lords of Rainbow*, about a world without color, and the unusually intertwined story collection *Dreams of the Compass Rose* are forthcoming in trade paperback from Wildside Press in 2001. For more information, visit www.veranazarian.com.

Author’s note: The fairy tale of the swan brothers and their stoic mute sister has always been a childhood favorite with me, though I believe the original Russian variation that I’ve read had 12 brothers. As a very little girl back in my native Moscow, Russia, I’ve even had dreams of this story, of flying with the swans. And I’ve always dreamed of having many brothers. Although it’s hard to say were exactly this fairytale originated, in many ways it is deeply Russian—in its portrayal of duty and enduring silence and loyalty. And swans figure prominently in Russian folklore, usually to indicate purity and beauty not only of the body, but of the soul.

DAVID J. SCHWARTZ lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he works as a bartender. He holds a BA in Scandinavian Studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and attended the 1996 Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop at New Hampshire College, run by Jeanne Cavelos. He has written two novels and is working on a third. “The Comfort of Thunder” is his first professional sale.

Author’s note: Most of the inspiration for this story came from my grandmother’s death. After her wake we all went to the only bar in the rural Minnesota town where she had lived her entire life, and drank more than we should. On the morning of the funeral, reality hit hard. Thor came into the story because of his connections with death,

both as a shaman who guides the souls of the dead to the afterlife and as someone who knows the moment of his own death, at Ragnarok, poisoned by the Midgard Serpent. The Norse gods have always fascinated me precisely because they are aware of their own mortality. I went after a Scandinavian Studies Major partly because my mother's family is Norwegian, but also because I'm fascinated by the mythology and the influence it had on the culture, and does even today. I wondered how Thor's attitudes towards life and death would differ from our own. This is the result.

DOUGLAS SMITH's stories have appeared in professional markets in eight countries and six languages, including *Amazing Stories*, *Cicada*, and *Treachery & Treason* in the US; *Interzone* and *The Third Alternative* in the UK; and *Prairie Fire*, *Tesseract*⁵, and *Solaris* (Québec) in Canada. He is a four-time finalist for the Aurora Award for best SF&F short fiction by a Canadian writer. Two of his stories were recently selected for honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #13*. In real life, Doug is the CIO in Canada for an international consulting firm. He lives north of Toronto with his wife and two sons. Like the rest of humanity, he is working on a novel. He can be reached at doug@smithwriter.com. His website is www.geocities.com/canadian_sf/pages/authors/smith.htm.

Author's note: As a child, I spent many summers with my family at a rented cottage on Georgian Bay, just north of Wasaga Beach. My favorite memories are of early mornings, windy and overcast, walking on the wide sandy beach, alone except for the crashing of waves and the cries of the gulls. Many years later, I began studying karate with my oldest son. One summer, my club held a weekend camp at Georgian Bay. Much to my surprise, the location they chose was the same collection of cottages from my childhood summers, and I spent the weekend practising and sparring on that same beach. At the end of the weekend, I walked that beach again, remembering those mornings of long ago. Somewhere in that stroll, this story was born. "The Red Bird" combines martial arts, a lonely beach, and a very singular bird that is definitely something more than a simple seagull, into a fable set in what might or might not be late 14th century Japan.

ALLAN WEISS is a writer and part-time university instructor in Toronto. His SF stories have appeared in *Tesseract* 4 and 7, *Prairie Fire*, and *On Spec*, and his collection of non-SF stories, *Living Room*, was recently published by Boheme Press.

Author's note: I wrote the first draft of "The Missing Word" nearly 30 years ago. I had never seen a Jewish wizard in the fantasy stories I'd read, nor did I expect to see one. Of course, the story reflects my own cultural background, and I found the narrative voice very comfortable. Also, its theme of the power of language, an important element in both Jewish thought and magic generally, embodies my interests as a writer as well. Everything in the story, from the protagonist to the themes to the image of the Wandering Jew, seemed to come to me at once and fit seamlessly together. I couldn't bear to see the story disappear into a drawer. And it was great fun to write.

ELIZABETH WESTBROOK will write anything for money in order to support her short fiction habit. This is her fourth publication in *On Spec*. In addition to journalism and fiction aired on CBC Radio One and in newspapers and journals, she writes interactive murder mystery scripts and works as an independent creative writing specialist with various programs in the school system. One such program involves students learning curriculum through the arts.

Author's note: Students develop creative thinking by studying school subjects through painting, dancing, writing, acting and more. "Sedna's Daughter" was conceived as a result of a writing project with Grade One and Two students learning about Atlantic Coast and Inuit peoples. As I wrote alongside the children, I became entranced by the mythology of the north and the unique culture and voices of the Newfoundland outports. And it all built from there. ♣

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